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13th of June, Saturday, 1992

"I want the Quidditch Cup in my office next June!" Slughorn looked extremely disappointed that morning as the Slytherins prepared to depart. "What happened this year is *absolutely* unacceptable."

With the Slytherin and Gryffindor Quidditch teams gutted, the Cup would have been decided between the Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs. Hufflepuff had clenched the Quidditch Cup by a hair's breadth, their first victory in nearly two decades.

"Yes, Professor," Marcus Flint grunted. Judging by the pulsing vein on his neck, the Slytherin captain was even more disgruntled than their head of House. "But the headmaster banned half of the team from playing until next April, and our reserve players are… lacking."

House Points were cut to a tenth at the start of the next school year to give each House a relatively clean slate while not invalidating their previous accomplishments, so nobody was worried. However, the Quidditch team was gutted for the next year, too.

Moreover, Higgs, Botley, Montague, Bole, Borgins, and Tyndall would forever be remembered for wearing pink robes while shovelling shit for those detentions. Very few could look at any of them without erupting into a storm of chortles and giggles, and Draco had heard Bole had broken up with his girlfriend for it.

"I don't care," the Potions Professor puffed up like an angry walrus. "Find better players. Perhaps you will succeed better if you don't exclude half of the House from the tryouts next year."

Slughorn walked out of the common room while Flint shrunk under the overwhelming cheers from the female students. This was the first time Draco had seen the Carrow twins smile, and by Merlin, it was creepy. Even the usually daring team captain looked warily at the two of them.

They still had nearly an hour before boarding the Hogwarts Express, and many Slytherins clustered around the announcement board.

"I suppose Slughorn is still miffed," Pansy sniggered. Professor Sprout looked happy enough to grow wings and fly with the cup in hand yesterday, and she didn't stop praising Tonks and her team before Flitwick and Slughorn. *Loudly and often*. Draco had never seen the Potions professor looking so constipated before.

"Well, he did have to surrender the Quidditch Cup," Draco grunted. "Our team was the best of the four… before Weasley went to tattle to the headmaster."

That was a sore topic for everyone who loved Quidditch in Slytherin. But now, nobody dared to bother the youngest Weasley brother. Not anymore. While alone and young, the lion still had claws, and Draco remembered the pain from his broken nose. The upper years didn't dare make any further trouble either; Slughorn had promised to expel anyone who stepped out of line personally.

“Let’s check the final scores,” Theodore Nott urged, sensibly changing the topic. Draco had managed to befriend Theo shortly after Christmas–the Nott heir looked rather plain with his brown hair and dark eyes, with the only distinguishable feature being his high cheekbones.

Slytherin First Years were divided into two groups: Damien Greengrass with his twin sister Daphne, Tracey Davis, Blaise Zabini, and Lily Moon on one side, and Draco leading Crabbe, Goyle, Theo, and Pansy on the other. A few other students hovered between both groups or stuck to themselves, like Bulstrode and Gamp, but they were irrelevant.

“Fine,” Draco agreed, and they started to push their way through the crowd with the help of Crabbe and Goyle.

Unlike the other Houses, things in the so-called snake den were different. The wrangle for influence in Slytherin went through many aspects, and their parents even encouraged it. After all, you could make connections and alliances in school and get to know your peers, be they friends or foes. There wasn’t a precise structure, but someone always stood at the top–a lone powerhouse, a pair - usually a power couple, or even the infamously unstable triumvirate that almost always resulted in mayhem. They could dominate Slytherin to a small degree or simply leverage their position through favours, contacts, and even alliances.

Nothing drastic, of course, but even if you were a no-name nobody from a poor lineage, you could make connections, bag a decent spouse, or even get your hands on an apprenticeship. For example, Cornelius Fudge had been such a figure, infamously known for his ability to network and moderate stances on almost every matter. Even after dominating Slytherin for only his seventh year, the connections he had made and later painstakingly kept up and developed smoothed his way through the ranks of the Ministry and possibly tilted the scales of the latest Minister of Magic election, if barely.

Of course, the struggle for the position was fierce since the benefits were plentiful. The current top dogs in Slytherin were the sixth-year prefects Elise Travers and Roger Rosier, who had slain the troll that waylaid their house on All Hallow’s Eve. They teamed up to grab power and even managed to leverage that whole affair into a betrothal agreement from their families.

Anyone with a lick of ambition would struggle in Slytherin, first to come on top of his year and then–the whole of Slytherin. Those who followed along with such a figure also reaped plenty of benefits and connections, so the system where everyone converged towards a leader had crystallised over the centuries.

Not all who reached the summit of their House were successful later in life, of course, and there was a good chunk who didn’t wrangle for influence at all, and the younger years usually avoided that game. However, Draco had no choice–his mother *and* father expected him to do his utmost here.

They finally reached the board, and Theo, being the slimmest and the shortest of them all, managed to slip in first.

“You’re second in overall first-year Slytherin,” he said.

The second spot sounded reasonable enough, but Draco knew it was a defeat, especially at the hands of Greengrass. Worse, there were two mud-bloods on the list for the final ranking. He had reached the ninth spot, but it was barely a consolation.

Hogwarts 1991-1992 Academic Year, First Year Final Rankings

1-Harry J. Potter

2-Juno B. Lestrange

3-Diana R. Taylor

4-Hermione J. Granger

5-Sue Li

6-Sophie E. Roper

7-Damien C. Greengrass

8-Hannah E. Abbot/Anthony Goldstein

9-Draco L. Malfoy

10-Ronald B. Weasley…

Draco swallowed, but the lump in his throat did not go away, and it was not because Weasley had almost surpassed him in Potions.

"Potter is top for all the subjects with *Outstanding plus*, practical and theory," Nott noted dryly. "What a surprise."

Pansy also slipped through by Draco's side.

"Look," she pointed at the Astronomy grades. "Moon managed to pass that daft cow, Lestrange."

Draco's eyes traced her finger and saw the conspicuous Lily Moon sit in second place on the Astronomy list, just beneath Potter. It didn't make him feel any better since Moon was friends with the Greengrass twins. However, Pansy was ecstatic, for she and Juno got on like water and oil. The last time they had talked was at that boring annual ball his father loved to host–Pansy had left crying after trying to speak to the Black heiress.

"At least next year Quirrell won't be here to shower her with points," Theo stretched lazily.

Pansy was scandalised, "That's a terrible thing to say. Professor Quirrell was a great teacher!"

"Indeed, but it doesn't change the fact, does it?" The dark-haired boy snarked back.

"Well, yes, but it won't help us clinch the House Cup since Flitwick still throw points at Potter," she groused. "*Extraordinary, Mr Potter! Fifteen points for standing on the chair perfectly!"* Crabbe and Goyle laughed loudly at Professor Flitwick's squeaky and all-too-accurate sounding imitation, but Draco was not amused.

"Har har," Theo scoffed. "Flitwick is far more measured. Besides, don't tell me you will miss those endless duels with the 'Puffs. My ears are still sore from your complaints about getting sweaty in the middle of the day." The short boy was one of the few students who didn't like Quirrell too much.

Yet Draco's mind was weighed by worry, and he only listened with half an ear. They gathered their baggage soon, and his body went through the motions mechanically as they headed for the Hogwarts Express and took one of the compartments.

Quirrell's death, the Hogwarts House Cup, the Quidditch House Cup, the Wiltshire Explosion, or even Petrov's escape were hot topics you could hear amidst every House, regardless of the year. Draco had heard them all discussed to death and beyond, but his thoughts did not dwell on them.

He was returning home without fulfilling even one of his parents' tasks, and the lump in his throat grew.

Would his mother berate him? While seemingly amiable, Narcissa Malfoy could be more demanding than his father.

Draco had failed to establish himself in Slytherin; Greengrass had half of the first years.

He had failed to take one of the top three spots in the year, as his father had demanded, and was even second fiddle to Greengrass in Slytherin *again*.

Nor were his attempts to befriend Harry Potter successful—whenever the Boy Who Lived was in the Great Hall or classes, Juno hovered near him, and Draco did not dare approach. His cousin could be brutal if provoked; her jealousy knew no bounds.

Worse, Draco had failed to approach children from the more influential families in Hufflepuff because the tangle against Greengrass kept him busy. The damned boy somehow even befriended Weasley, of all people!

Would his father look at him with disappointment?

Would his mother punish him for his failures?

Would his parents have the same expectations of him the next year? Or worse, even bigger?

The lump at the back of his throat grew bigger, joined by the uncomfortable twist in his stomach, as if an angry niffler was trying to rearrange his insides in search of gold. Draco did better than many others, but it still tasted like failure, like defeat. No matter how hard he tried, Greengrass managed to come out on top.

And there wasn't some insurmountable difference, like with Juno or Potter; Damien was just one or two steps ahead at most, while they were equal in most subjects. But Draco couldn't take the lead no matter how hard he studied.

It was irritating in a burning way that ate away at you from the inside.

"Are you okay, Draco?" Pansy's voice broke him out of his musings. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," he snapped. A moment later, Draco regretted it as she sniffled angrily and started digging through her trunk, probably for Witch Weekly, pretending he did not exist. He was almost tempted to apologise, but his pride won out.

God, he was annoyed.

They *wouldn't* understand; none of them would. Sure, Crabbe and Goyle would probably not even be capable of comprehending the thorny conundrum Draco was facing. But Pansy was not stupid, even though she never cared much about studying. Why would she, especially since her goal was to mooch off some rich or powerful wizard? Preferably rich *and* powerful.

Theo was in a similar position as him, but the dark-haired boy avoided this topic as if it were a runespoor. He had given up on the unspoken competition, content to study just enough so old Thaddeus Nott wouldn't be too disgruntled.

Draco was almost tempted to follow in Theo's footsteps and embrace mediocrity. Just… giving up seemed so easy. So simple. After all, he would inherit everything from his parents–sizeable fortune, connections, influence, estate. More than enough so that Draco would never want for anything.

But it would mean accepting Damien Greengrass was better than him. It would mean withdrawing from Slytherin's power plays or supporting that smug plonker.

And Draco would rather die than listen to his puffed-up nemesis.

His fists clenched as his eyes roamed around the room. Crabbe and Goyle were already snoring away. Theo looked at the latest newspaper about the Wiltshire Explosion with a fierce frown, and Pansy was engrossed in Witch Weekly's Friday edition, trying to pretend nobody else existed.

Draco tried staring out the window, but even the green, roiling hills grew boring quickly.

The compartment felt suffocating, and Draco stood up, deciding to stretch his legs in the corridor. He didn't even bother waking Crabbe and Goyle to accompany him.

Aside from a few wandering Hufflepuffs swarming around the trolley lady, the corridors were mostly empty. Draco squeezed around the commotion, letting his feet lead him on while idly inspecting the other compartments.

Some were reading or napping; others played gobstones or exploding snap or were engrossed in deep conversations about Quidditch or the news. Draco couldn't bring himself to care about any of those topics.

And then he reached the last compartment and was just about to turn around when his feet halted.

Harry Potter, Diana Taylor, Padma Patil, Morag MacDougal, Anthony Goldstein, and… *no* Juno. She left the school after the exams had ended for Lord Black's funeral.

A chance!

Swallowing down his hesitation and fighting against the desire to flee, Draco knocked on the door and pulled it open.

His mouth went dry, and he had to push down the urge to flee under the five sets of eyes gazing at him in unison. None seemed even remotely intimidated by him, and Draco finally felt the lack of Crabbe and Goyle's presence. Without them, his peers did not seem to take him seriously.

Potter was dressed in simple but cosy-looking muggle pants and a dark blue hoodie and, as always, held some book in his hand.

"Did you confuse the compartment, Malfoy?" Goldstein asked suspiciously.

"No," Draco swallowed again, trying to cover his nervousness, but probably failed. "Potter, a word?"

This was his chance to bring anything before his parents, and Draco wouldn't get angry over a pompous boy, especially since Greengrass annoyed him far worse.

"Sure," Potter nodded, though his eyes were narrowed, and Draco quickly stepped out to wait outside.

"Should we get you something when the trolley lady comes?" Patil asked.

The reply was muffled but confident, and a moment later, Potter came out of the compartment, and the door closed behind him.

Draco began to squirm under the Boy Who Lived's piercing gaze as they stared silently at each other. At that moment, he *really* regretted not bringing Crabbe and Goyle.

Potter's green eyes glowed with such intensity that even Juno lacked, making him feel small. When he came to school, Harry Potter was just a distant name, albeit a very famous one. Yet hearing the name or some things a baby did a decade ago could hardly compare with seeing the boy in person. Potter was *powerful* and *capable* beyond what even the most salacious rumours suggested, even if he mainly kept to himself.

"How can I help you, Malfoy?" Potter was the first to speak, his voice neutral.

"Well…" Draco grimaced inwardly, trying to think of something as the silence stretched on awkwardly. "...I wanted to invite you to my father's annual summer gala."

Potter didn't decline immediately, which was great. Yet the fierce frown on his face gave Malfoy jitters. Merlin, Potter had a more tyrannical presence than Juno without trying and was no longer as short as before. Standing before the boy, Draco could easily believe he had killed two trolls alone.

Unlike the rest of their peers, his face looked as readable as a stone wall. Even Draco's mother's half-forgotten lessons on how to watch out for body language, facial expressions, and many other minute details seem to come short. All he could see was that Potter had no tells besides the slight tensing in his shoulders, which could mean *anything*.

"And where will this gala take place, Malfoy?" The green-eyed boy asked.

"Call me Draco," he barely suppressed his sigh of relief. "As for the time and place, it's Malfoy Manor the day after the summer solstice."

The gala was in less than ten days, and his mother would be fiercely displeased with a last-minute addition to the guests. But hopefully, it would be fine if it was Harry Potter, especially after all that badgering about getting closer to the Boy Who Lived. It would be good for public image and some similar drivel.

The silence quickly became oppressive; Draco began sweating while Potter got lost in thought.

"...I suppose I can come," he nodded eventually, and the blonde boy felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "But I will have to ask you for a small favour."

"Sure," Draco happily said.

"I've heard you have some *issues,*" Potter's face scrunched up as if he ate something sour, "with Ron Weasley."

"Just minor disagreement with his brothers," Draco waved the words away, and then it struck him. Did Potter want to recruit Weasley, now that the red-haired menace had shown himself capable? This was perfect; everything aligned perfectly. "I can forget about it for you. Just say the word, and I'll pretend he doesn't even exist."

Potter nodded stiffly.

"I would appreciate it." He turned around to open the compartment door and waved, "See you soon… Draco."

Draco couldn't help but pat himself on the shoulder as he turned back to his compartment with a spring in his step. The day no longer looked dark or gloomy, and not only did he make a friend out of Potter, but Damien Greengrass would stand no chance to pull in Weasley if Potter did it first!

Perhaps not bringing Crabbe and Goyle had indeed been a wise decision.

As usual, Sirius awoke with a warm body next to him, and the choking stench of sweat and sex threatened to suffocate him. It was accompanied by the heavy feeling of deja vu, as if something similar had happened many times before.

“Good morning… Bridget?” he murmured while rubbing his eyes and looking at the foxy blonde in his bed.

He saw stars as a stinging slap landed on his cheek.

“Name’s Elizabeth, you lecher,” she hissed as she grabbed her clothes and quickly stormed out. Sirius cringed when he heard a few things break in the other room until his front door slammed close with its usual creak, and blissful silence returned.

“Merlin, she has a strong wrist,” Sirius rubbed his probably reddened cheek.

Memories of last evening came with a vengeance as his head pulsed painfully next. He had drunk too much of that muggle booze–two bottles of vodka… and remembered kissing a bunch of women in the pub… perhaps it was a bar. Or maybe a disco?

Sirius couldn’t truly remember, as most of his nights merged together. So did the faces and names of the women he had slept with. All muggles, of course; he couldn’t be bothered with the wizarding world, aside from the occasional visit to Ted and the Tonkses. The prude didn’t want to go to a pub, not with Andromeda waiting at home for him.

Besides, most witches were far more prim and proper than the muggles.

After ten minutes of groaning and a hangover potion from his stash, Sirius was finally presentable, and the front door was locked. With a lazy swipe of his wand, the broken stand and the shattered cups were as good as new. A glance at the clock on the wall told him it was one in the afternoon. He had probably forgotten something, but it would surely come to him in time.

He turned on the telly while scrambling some eggs and putting juicy strips of bacon on the pan for himself. God, he loved the fridge; those muggles were quite industrious. It was worth spending extra galleons to have an enchanter come and magic-proof the muggle devices.

It wasn’t that great–the more delicate the electronic device, the easier it was to break with magic, and even preventive enchantments dwindled quickly. Sirius could use a handful of household charms every day safely, but any more, his muggle gadgets would blow up, enchantments or not. He should know, for his stove had exploded the last time he used too much magic in his apartment for a day. Without the enchantments, a stronger apparition could make things go boom.

“...Yeltsin denies any Soviet involvement in the Wiltshire incident…” the news anchor blabbered on and on, “Military experts from the Pentagon and RAF spokesperson-”

“Bloody boring shite,” Sirius muttered as he switched the channel to the Box.

“-Oh, oh, It’s a passion, oh-oh, you can feel it in the air…” The singing was good, but the picture, or video, as they called it, was bizarre. The muggle woman singing in the shiny… how did they call it again? Ah yes, shiny latex clothing was decent enough, but the dark background and her assortment of dancing men were terribly dull.

In Sirius' most humble opinion, she would have far more success if she found a bunch of scantily dressed dancers to sway along to the rhythm instead. How successful would the Weird Sisters be if they had a bunch of half-naked Veela singing and dancing?

After the bacon turned dark golden on both sides, Sirius sat to eat and cracked open a cold one from the fridge.

His mind finally caught up to him, yet the niggling feeling of having forgotten something did not go away. The bacon tasted delicious as usual, but his mind wandered. Being idle was beginning to get boring. The girls and the booze were great, but no matter how much booze went into his gut, the emptiness deep inside did not go away. No matter how many women warmed his bed, the memory of the chill still lingered.

Sirius often stared into space when alone; his mind was simply blank, though this became rarer as time passed.

Ted and the healers had assured him that his body was healthy, and so was his mind. But the void, the chilly memories of the dementors and the veil of hopelessness and dread that choked the surroundings would never go away fully.

The purpose and the drive Sirius had back in his youth had all been drained out by Azkaban. He could no longer remember what he wanted to do before the war. The terror and fighting had taken almost every aspect of Wizarding Britain, and his goals had been to fight and survive. Then, the war had ended, and Sirius had been chucked in Azkaban.

And now that he was out, he didn't know what to do. Even those childish dreams he had back in the early years of Hogwarts had long been forgotten—something silly about becoming a professional Quidditch player.

Sirius couldn't even bring himself to care that much anymore. He had accepted and gotten used to it–a skill one had to pick up to survive in House Black, even if he didn't like it. Even after over half a year, Remus had yet to show up. After hundreds of galleons and weeks of searching, Sirius had given up looking for his final friend.

It's been nearly eight years since anyone last saw or heard from Moony–the trail went cold in the Zagros mountains in Asia. Sirius had almost gone abroad to look himself, but Ted had convinced him otherwise.

And so, the eternal bachelor, or dog, as his cousin loved to call him, continued doing what he did best–drinking and chasing skirts. It was easy, especially the muggle women who folded with a few sweet words, rugged smiles, and his natural charm. Gold wouldn't be an issue for decades after Crouch's reimbursement and his uncle Alphard's sizeable inheritance.

Sirius blinked, realised he was staring at the wall again and returned to his no-longer hot bacon. Even the scrambled eggs had turned half-rubbery. Yet the feeling something was missing, forgotten, remained.

He looked at the door–it was locked.

The living room was also half decent after a few cleaning and household charms. The fridge… was full of beer, bacon, and relatively fresh eggs. His wand was strapped to his holster; Sirius was not due to visit Ted until Wednesday…

What was he forgetting again?

He had to write to Harry tomorrow-

“Merlin’s scurvy bollocks,” he cursed, almost choking on his bacon. The Hogwarts school year was ending today!

Sirius finally apparated on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters just fifteen minutes before the train would arrive. Even his precious stubble had been shaved clean to look presentable, and his apartment had been perfectly cleaned, even if he had to do it by hand lest his telly explode.

All traces of women were eliminated, including the two dozen pairs of laced or satin knickers–Harry was too young for that type of stuff.

Maybe in two or three years.

After frantically inspecting the crowd of parents, he caught a single friendly and familiar face.

“Ted bet you would have forgotten,” Andromeda chuckled, though there was a slight disapproval in her tone. Disowned or not, she loved being prim and proper, and Sirius was oftentimes anything but, especially his infamous nightly escapades. “You almost look decent.”

Which was a generous endorsement from a skilled seamstress like herself. The years had been good to his cousin. Dressed in an elaborate cerulean robe rimmed with silver that hugged her ample curves all too much, and with her shapely arse, generous bust, and high-cheek bones, Andromeda was a vision of beauty. Her hair was like dark chocolate, while the rims of the sleeves and collars decorated with delicate silver flowers brought out her pale grey eyes.

Ted sure was a lucky bloke. Of course, Sirius was far from the only one who appreciated the woman–many other men on the platform, some of them looking somewhat familiar, had also noticed the vision of beauty, much to their spouses’ chagrin.

Andromeda’s self-made dress was a clever way to advertise her wares–tailoring custom-made garments. She even made muggle clothes, and Sirius had, of course, purchased plenty. Any self-respecting skirt-chaser like him had to be smartly dressed to increase his chances of success, and his cousin offered the best.

“Not everyone can look as stylish as a seamstress mistress,” Sirius tutted. “Or, well, as dashing as me!”

“Incorrigible as ever,” Andromeda shook her head. “Are you ready to raise a young boy?” The Tonkses knew he would be raising Harry–supposedly in his apartment in Bristol.

He scratched his head. “I mean… how hard could it be?”

His cousin grimaced.

“Believe me, it can be quite hard,” she sighed. “Once the hormones hit… at least yours isn’t a Metamorphmagus.”

“That’s just part of boyhood,” he waved the concern away. “Besides, I talked to Harry and wrote to him weekly–he seems sensible and smart. You know, the sort that could handle themselves on their own.”

“I have no doubt you’ll try to corrupt the poor boy,” Andromeda wagged her finger.

“Vile slander,” Sirius instantly denied. “A little fun never hurt anyone. Besides, I do know how to control myself.” At least when there was a reason, and his godson was all the reason he needed. “So, how’s Eros doing?”

“First year in the Auror Academy finished with top honours,” her voice was laced with pride, but then her face soured. “If only he didn’t pick–”

The words died on her lips as all emotion bled out from Andromeda’s face. She adopted an utterly blank look while looking at something behind him.

Sirius turned to check and couldn’t help but scowl. Narcissa was there, hanging on Malfoy’s arm and looking all high and mighty, with her usual catty expression, looking down on the world as if everyone else was beneath her.

“A match made in hell,” Sirius muttered. “You were wise to ditch that blonde ponce for Ted.”

“I’m far from the only one,” she chuckled. Yet it was not one out of joy but one of those cold, chilling sounds members of House Black had perfected that made Sirius’s hair stand to an end, reminding him of things he would rather forget. “Didn’t you run away once the talks for Audrey Mulciber’s hand reached your ears?

The name made him frown.

“Partly,” Sirius admitted. The memory of his supposed future betrothal his mother had tried to arrange was blurry, but Sirius still remembered the lingering feeling. It was the last thing that solidified his decision to run away from House Black. After all, who would want to wed some pimpled menace with a thick waist and a voice that sounded like the grunting of a troll?

That she was an utter bitch certainly did not help, either.

Andromeda’s left hand was tensed, which meant she was ready to draw her wand at any time.

“At least House Black is on its last leg now,” she smiled thinly. “With your aunt Lucretia and the old bastard, Arcturus, croaking, almost all of the old grouches are dead. If luck shines upon me, my dearest mother would probably drink herself to death soon.”

“I’d toast you if I had some proper fire whiskey now,” Sirius nodded. “Hopefully, Bella’s daughter would do a far better job than my crotchety grandfather.”

“That’s a low bar to cross-” Her following words were drowned out by the deafening chime announcing the Hogwarts Express’ arrival.

Within a minute, the red locomotive halted at the platform, now flooded with children as parents tried to find their sprogs.

“Talk to you next week,” Sirius patted his cousin’s shoulder and started looking for Harry. The Tonkses were decent, and he’d introduce his godson to them soon enough.

In five minutes of pushing through the crowds of students, happy with the start of their lengthy summer holiday, Sirius finally found Harry at the far end of the platform. He was garbed in simple muggle clothes, with Hedwig proudly perched atop his shoulder, surrounded by a group of kids his age.

A boy who looked quite like a smaller but just as pompous version of Edwin Goldstein waved them goodbye, leaving his godson alone with two lasses. As expected!

The Indian-looking girl also tore away from their group as Sirius blinked, but not before she doubled. If his godson's letters were correct, they were the Patil twins.

"Hello, Harry," Sirius greeted. "And who is your friend here?"

"Hello, sir. I'm Diana Taylor," the short, auburn-haired girl shyly introduced herself. "I just spotted my parents. Bye, Harry, and don't forget to write!"

And just like that, his godson was alone, and they once again stared at each other for ten long, silent, and awkward seconds, as if they had not exchanged letters for over half a year.

Suddenly, Harry stared at something behind him, and Sirius turned and had to do his best not to flinch away at the blank stares of two similar pairs of eerie heterochromatic eyes. Blinking a few times and rubbing his eyes, he found that the eyes were still staring at him in a completely deadpan manner.

"Hey, Hestia, Flora." His godson approached the twin girls. Dressed in dark and green, they were undoubtedly Slytherin and looked at least a year older than Harry, if not more.

And their eerie, doll-like smiles, oh Merlin, sent shivers down his spine like a thousand ants crawling underneath his shirt.

"Harry, we spoke to Father, and he agreed we can see you in the summer. He even permitted us to invite you to the family manor."

"We will expect you at your earliest convenience… cousin."

His godson nodded absentmindedly while the twins glanced at each other before moving to his side and giving him a light hug in unison. There was something unnatural in their gazes; it wasn't their stiff faces or eyes being heterochromatic. It was the way the girls' gazes moved in unison, Sirius realised.

Harry froze as the girls smiled in that same unnerving way before walking away to one Reginald Carrow waiting in the distance. How could such a normal-looking wizard produce such sinister daughters?

"So, what's the first thing you wanna do in the summer?" Sirius asked, trying not to think about the eerie faces.

"Well," Harry leaned in, his voice dwindling to a whisper. "Do you know a way to remove the Trace from my wand?"

Sirius' eyes lit up.

"I like how you think," he rubbed his chin as he led the way to the nearest apparition point. "Give me three, no, two days, and I will do something about it. My parents dispelled the Trace for me at the end of the first year, and your grandfather Fleamont did the same for James after his third, so it shouldn't be too hard."

His godson nodded solemnly–all too seriously, in Sirius' humble opinion. Summer was supposed to be a time of freedom, and he wanted to see Harry smile more.

"Right… I should probably mention that I am invited to the–er," his boyish face turned sour as if he had eaten a lemon, "Malfoy solstice gala."

"Do you want to go?"

“Just this one to see what it’s like,” Harry shrugged, looking uncomfortable. Was his godson afraid Sirius would judge him?

The thought made his heart clench uncomfortably.

“I suppose we can go together,” Sirius declared. “Though, be warned, pureblood events like this are full of stuffy and proud snobs with sticks up their arse.”

The smile on Harry’s face made his day far more than bagging a beautiful date did. Even the coldness of Azkaban seemed distant to the prospect of the coming summer, and the void inside didn’t feel as heavy.

Oh, Merlin, all the things he could teach his godson! Of course, pranks and mischief would be a welcome respite for Sirius, but that was just a small part of the knowledge and experience he could impart.

Being a godfather… it meant something. Something that actually mattered. Being responsible for someone else other than himself.

Sirius had promised Lily and James that he would care for Harry as if he were his own should something happen to them. And now, he no longer felt as lost as yesterday or the day before.

The sense of purpose awoke something Sirius Black thought had vanished from him.

Author’s Endnote: The summer will have its mini-arc (5 chapters), hopefully not drag on too long. Don’t expect me to keep expanding things indefinitely.

Starring: Draco “What if my Mother hears of my failures?” Malfoy, Andromeda “I don’t need a rich snob of a husband to be successful” Tonks, Sirius “Fuck women and booze, I’m gonna be the best godfather ever” Black.

P.S. Fudge didn’t ascent to the chair of the Minister of Magic solely because he managed to come out on top in Slytherin (that’s Draco and unreliable narrator). It was just one of the things that tilted the final scales of victory(like think ~10% at the *very most*), and Fudge himself kept in touch and nurtured any such previous connections and influences.