

Sirius shrugged. “They’re Molly’s kids. If she doesn’t want them doing magic, that’s her problem. Don’t see why she’s so determined to lie to them, though; they’d be able to clean much faster with magic.”

“Wouldn’t we just,” Harry groused. “It’s like being back at the bloody Dursleys. I thought you said every Black property had a house elf?”

A dark look flickered across Sirius’ face. “There is technically a house elf bound to this house. His name is Kreacher. But he’s mad as a box of monkeys and dangerously obsessed with my mum and the darker side of the family — I didn’t think it’d be safe to have him around with the Order needing secrecy and everything. So I sent him off to one of the unoccupied Black properties where he couldn’t do any harm.”

“Why didn’t you bring Ceri here?”

“And give Dumbledore access to a good Black house elf?” Sirius retorted. “Worse, give Molly access to one of my elves? She’d be bossing poor Ceri around like she was the head of the damn family — she’s certainly got no trouble doing so to me and every other bugger under this roof. Conveniently forgetting it’s *my* roof and I allow her and her family to live under it. Besides,” he smirked a Marauder-ish smirk, “cleaning the house by hand is giving everyone something to do. Made it easier for me to come see you at Seren Du if they were all occupied. Dumbledore and Molly are the ones who want it clean and empty of cursed objects — it certainly doesn’t bother me any. I grew up surrounded by all this filth, and it’s still cleaner than Azkaban.” He winked at Harry. “I’m not gonna be here any more than I have to be, pup. But if they want to slave away with rags and such to make this place presentable, they can be my guests.”

Harry snickered to himself. “So you *do* know how to be a bit Slytherin when it suits you,” he accused playfully. Sirius’ answering grin was devious.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, pup,” he replied drily. “I am the very epitome of a Gryffindor.”

“Just as much as I am.”

“Exactly,” Sirius agreed, grinning. Harry couldn’t help but grin back.

At least he had allies, in this awful house. He could survive the next few weeks.

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That night, Harry made sure the house was quiet and his door was warded before he pulled a small silver mirror from his bedside drawer and propped it up on his knees. “Draco Malfoy,” he murmured quietly. It took a few beats, but soon Draco was staring back at him through the glass. Just seeing him made Harry’s heart stutter, warmth flooding to his fingertips.

“Where are you now?” Draco asked, eyeing him curiously. “That isn’t the muggles’ place.”