

The Proof of the Pudding

by nata

In the time of joy, one young recruit is pushed too far.

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Beta-read by amazing Cassandra7.

"Pass the pudding, Rabastan." Regulus Black extended his arm over the long table that ran down the centre of the grand dining room at Malfoy Manor.

"Sorry?" Rabastan Lestrangle set his knife and fork on the edge of his plate, lifted his white linen napkin from his lap, and dabbed at the corners of his mouth.

"The pudding." Regulus waved his outstretched arm. "I'd like some more."

"I didn't hear the magic words," said Rabastan, sitting back in his chair.

"What?"

"It's Mr Lestrangle to you, newbie, and I assume your harridan of a mother taught you a magic word or two."

Several of the young men seated around the table snickered. Reference to Mrs Black was guaranteed to raise an objection and provide entertainment. They weren't disappointed.

"Leave my mother out of this!"

Bellatrix Lestrangle craned her head from the far end of the table.

"Regulus, he's just trying to upset you." Abraxas Malfoy put his hand on the younger man's arm.

"I know!"

"And he's succeeding."

"I know! Why can't he just pass the fucking pudding?"

"Language, newbie!" Bellatrix's voice carried clearly across the room. "Endurance Training Session just for you right after dinner."

"It's Christmas, cousin," Regulus protested.

"Exactly. A few well-placed hexes will do you good." Bellatrix smiled at the other guests. "Everyone's welcome to join in."

"It's such fun to bait you, kid." Rabastan grinned. "It's as if I'd already opened my presents."

"Why don't you pick on Severus?" Regulus indicated a figure silently moving food around his plate. "He's only a year older than I am."

Severus looked up and lifted an eyebrow.

"How can I tease a person who sets your sorry arse straight with a single eyebrow? Don't tell me that he doesn't."

Regulus blushed like a twelve-year-old.

"Do you still want your pudding?" Rabastan asked.

Regulus nodded.

"Ask for it."

"Mr Lestrangle, would you please be so kind as to pass the Christmas pudding?"

"But of course, my dear Regulus," Rabastan said.

While everyone's attention was fixed on his beaming face, he shook his wand out of his sleeve and cast.

The pudding bowl rose, leaned to one side, and gathered speed towards Regulus. He dodged. The bowl chased him until the pudding landed square in his face. He leapt back and lost balance. Lying on the floor spread-eagled, custard goo dripping into his hair, Regulus gasped for breath.

The Death Eaters erupted in laughter.

The young man hauled himself up, spitting and cursing.

"You see, dear Regulus, the proof of the pudding's in the eating." Lucius Malfoy looked him up and down. "Literally, in your case," he drawled.

"You're pigs, that's what you are," Regulus said, with as much dignity as he could muster, and walked towards the lavatory.

Rabastan looked at faces around the table. "Just a little Christmas spirit."

"The boy's too high-strung," said Abraxas Malfoy.

Severus ignored their host. "A bit over the top, wasn't it, Rabastan?"

Rabastan muttered unintelligibly.

"If you ask me, he got what he'd asked for," Lucius said. "Where's the respect in these babies? If he acted like that with the Dark Lord present, he'd be forfeit. He'll survive longer if he learns some manners."

Severus sighed. "I'd better check on him."

"Thanks, mate," said Rabastan.

Severus quietly closed the lavatory door behind him.

His robes and shirt in a soggy mess at his feet, his dark hair drenched, Regulus stood by the stoppered washbasin and swirled the water pouring in it from both faucets. Severus picked up the clothes and, with a Cleansing Spell, restored them to their original state.

"Have you come to gloat?" Regulus asked without lifting his head.

"Give me a reason and I will."

"Yeah. I know I know better, Snape."

"Is it Snape now?"

Regulus whirled around, drops flying from his hair. "I was made a laughingstock, and what have you done? Nothing! You sat there and let them laugh at me. To be followed by endurance hexes for one. I've just had my Christmas dinner - bloody fucking hell! And you expect me to throw my arms round your neck and sob my heart out? No? Rant, then? I can rant. I promise you I'll get back at them. I'll do something none of them ever dared to think about. They won't know what hit them."

Severus had the impression that Regulus had gone beyond talking about Christmas pudding.

"Perhaps, if you could finish the temper tantrum, we could talk."

Regulus turned back to the basin, fuming. He checked himself in the mirror and bent over the water to remove soggy raisins from his hair.

Several more rinses with clean water, and Regulus took a towel and dried himself vigorously.

He sought Severus's eyes in the mirror.

"I'm calm now. Talk."

Severus approached him and embraced him from behind. He placed an open-mouthed kiss on Regulus's bare shoulder.

"Talk," Regulus repeated. "Don't try to distract me."

Severus looked at his reflection, noting his tented trousers.

"I would say it almost worked."

"Talk."

"Fine." Severus lifted both hands and stepped back. "They pick on you because you react."

"I know."

"Practice in controlling your emotions can only be beneficial to you."

"I know."

"Then why do you need me to spell it out for you?"

"It's good to have someone reflect your thoughts back." Regulus caught Severus's eyes. "It's good practice for you, too."

"Regulus." The warning in Severus's tone was unmistakable.

"I'm going on a field trip," Regulus said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Dark Lord."

"I believe that's what we were talking about just now."

"This is different."

"I see. Then you might consider not telling me about it if the Dark Lord didn't deem it necessary to enlighten me."

"Well, yeah. That's not precisely... They'll see."

They stood in silence for a few moments until Severus asked, "Do you want company?"

"Company?"

"Field trip."

"Ah. No. I'm taking a house-elf."

"Right." Neither of them said anything. Finally Severus asked, "Are you ready to rejoin the dinner, then?"

Regulus was silent.

"Did you know," he said at last, "there are single taps in which one can mix hot and cold running water?"

Severus nodded.

"Then why do we still have to watch out for raisins while scooping up water?"

"Because you let Rabastan get to you, Reg."

"What?" Regulus looked as if he had forgotten why Severus had followed him. "Oh. Yeah. The sacred manners that only work from one side." He frowned. "Do you know where I saw that?"

"The faucet? I can imagine."

"Why is it scalding or freezing water for us if Mudbloods can have warm? Don't you feel there's something rotten about the D..."

"Stop!" Severus covered Regulus's mouth. "Don't finish that sentence even in your mind," he hissed into his lover's ear.

Regulus nodded, and Severus slowly released him.

"I'll show them."

"If you must. Just be very careful about it." Severus met Regulus's eyes in the mirror, sharply nodded, and left.

Regulus heard Rabastan's *Did you make him feel all better?* before the door closed. He leaned his forehead against the cool surface of the mirror.

"Oh, dear," the mirror said. "You're going to have a red mark on your forehead if you keep that up."

Regulus looked up.

"You're right. I'm going to have a red mark on my forehead."

For a moment he stared at his reflection. Then he smiled.

"A marked man. But at least it will be over."