Never Enough ('Cause the World Won't Understand)

by InTheShadows

Summary

In a world where soulmates exist, it is possible to have two names printed on your wrist at birth. One will be your soulmate. The other, your enemy. There is no way to tell the difference or, if you only have one, which it is. Little Harry Potter dreams of the day he will finally meet his soulmate, someone who will actually love and want him. But as he grows up, he realizes that nothing is that simple. Especially not soulmates. Especially not his. 

Long, Multi-Chartered, Alternate Epilogue now added 9.10.18
**Trigger warning: suicidal thoughts** This is the darkest thing I have ever written, dear god. Usually I do some h/c and light angst, but when I say this is angst, *this is angst*. (Or at least I think so. I've been staring at this story so long, I don't even know.) It does have a hopeful ending, because I cannot. But Harry does have *issues* in this story, including suicidal thoughts/wishing he was dead. There's no attempts, but I thought it wise to warn anyways. Holy shit. This is officially the longest thing I have ever written. Ever. It first started out as two scenes. Two. Just little Harry freaking out about his soulmate either being Draco, who hates him or Voldemort, who wants to kill him. And then it evolved into this. Not that I didn't enjoy writing it, but it was a pain in the ass. Seriously, *a pain in the ass*. So glad I'm done with it.
Chapter Summary

In which it all begins.

When a person is born, a name is printed on their wrist like a tattoo. No wrist is the same. Sometimes there are two names instead of one. Sometimes there are none. But these names have a very special meaning. One name is your soulmate. The other is your enemy. There is no way to tell them apart. There is no way, if you only have one, to know which name you have. There is even a theory out there that states that if you only have one name, that means that that person is one and the same – both your soulmate and your rival. There are also whispers about broken souls, but those are only reserved for the bitter and those society deems unacceptable. Those who do not fit the social norms.

One of those people, a small child, resides at Number 4 Privet Drive. Harry Potter, the nephew of Petunia and Vernon Dursley, was deemed 'a Freak' as soon as he was discovered one cool November morning by his Aunt. For not only did he have magic, both of the names of his young wrist were male.

Now the Dursleys liked to think of themselves as normal, ordinary, respectable folks. So to have what they saw as a burden, a scuff mark on their charming reputation, did not set well with them. Not at all. They could hardly bear to look at the child. Minerva McGonagall was correct when she declared them the worst kind of muggles. Lily Potter's blood may have run through Petunia's veins, but her love and kindness most certainly did not. Not for the one who mattered. The one who needed it the most.

Dumbledore sent Harry there for protection. For as long as Harry called that place home, he would be protected. What the Headmaster failed to realize is that a house is not always a home. Not in all cases and certainly not in this one. Harry Potter did not grow up loved and spoiled and well cared for as everyone in the Wizarding World assumed. He was hidden, shoved away in the cupboard under the stairs. He repaid the Dursleys ten times over for his 'care' with chores – cooking, cleaning, yard work.

He would never call himself abused, but well... you don't lock a child in a small cupboard with a thin cot along with a thread worn blanket. You give him clothes that fit, not his cousins old cast aways that swallow his small body. You give him enough food to eat. You don't work him till exhaustion and beyond. You hug and reassure him, not cuff him on the side of the head and call him 'Freak'.

Dumbledore left Harry there to be loved and protected. He was left there so that he was free of all the political chaos and manipulation that surrounded him. He was left there so that his growing fame did not go to his head. He was left there, according to Dumbledore's plan. But the plan was destined to fail from the start.

A house is the place you stay. A home is the place you are loved. There will always be a difference. The former does not guarantee the latter.
Harry curls up under his blanket, shivering as another chill passes through his body. The nights are cooling off and it is not very warm in his cupboard. His blanket can only do so much, as worn as it is. His fingers gently run along the names on his wrists. He has long ago realized what they mean. He also knows he has to hide them.

During the day his Aunt and Uncle insist he keeps them covered with the rag they provided. Not everyone covers their names, but he has to. Because he is a Freak. His names are wrong. They set him apart. Something else to target him for. So he keeps them covered, wrapping the rag tightly around the names as many times as he can.

But at night, he likes to trace them. He imagines what they will be like. One of them will be his enemy, he knows. But the other... The other one will be his soulmate. Oh, how wonderful that sounds to him. He imagines finding his soulmate and being taken away from here. He won't care that he is a Freak. He won't care that freaky things happen around him when he is upset. He will love Harry just the way he is. He will rescue him and Harry will never have to see the Dursleys again.

It is a nice dream. It gets him through the days when he can do nothing right. It gets him through the nights when his stomach aches and the cold soaks into his very bones. It helps him when he is sick and exiled to the cupboard so he does not infect 'the precious Dudders'. It encourages him when he has to do worse than Dudley in school. It gives him hope when his very existence is too much.

He soulmate will love him. He will.

Draco Malfoy

Tom Riddle

One of those two men will save Harry from this life. He is still loveable to at least one person on this planet. He has to be. Because if he isn't... he has nothing left.

Dumbledore's plan counted on love. He never thought it would be withheld. He never knew what he condemned the young Saviour to. Or maybe he did, but justified himself instead. For the Greater Good.

"Yer a wizard Harry"

Those words echo in his head as he sits in his 'new room', staring out the window. At least it's bigger than the cupboard. And brighter too. The bed is old and uncomfortable, but at least it is off the ground. Farther from the cold. He even has a sheet and a blanket. It doesn't matter that they are old and worn. He now has two.

But he can't focus on this new treasure for long. Hagrid's words keep coming back to him. They repeat constantly in his mind. A wizard. He is a wizard. That's why he can do all those 'freaky'
things. It's magic. His magic. He has magic and he is going to leave this place. He is going to go to Hogwarts and not have to see the Dursleys ever again. After all, surely he can convince someone to let him stay over the summer. He'll already have a bed. And he has no problem with doing chores in exchange for letting him stay. And he can cook his own meals.

Anything will be better than staying here.

He continues to stare out the window. He wishes he could at least have a few of his new books to read. They sounded interesting. He had even managed to sneak a few pass Hagrid. Not the ones on the curses, but others. Ones about this new world. Learning was never something that Harry was encouraged to do. In fact it was something rather heavily disapproved of. How dare he be smarter than his wonderful, darling cousin?

But Harry was curious. He wanted to know more. What was this new world like? And the words that boy in the robe shop had spoken stuck with Harry. Oh he may be spoiled and he may remind Harry of Dudley. But he can't help but think that maybe the boy had a point. Not about keeping 'the other sort' out. But in coming into this new world completely blind.

The idea doesn't exactly sit well with him. Knowing is power because that is how you survive. If you don't know the rules, what is expected of you, you will face the consequences. So you have to know them otherwise you will be punished. He had learned that long ago. Be aware of your surroundings, know what is expected of you, do as you are told, don't stand out. Those are the rules Harry lives by. But now, going to Hogwarts, he is going to have to learn a new set of rules.

So he had snuck a couple of books the looked like introductory ones to the wizarding culture, it's history, Hogwarts and a few other subjects. He had hoped he could sneak them past the Dursleys, but no such luck. They are locked in his trunk in his old room.

So now all he has is his imagination to keep him company when he is not working. Which, admittedly, is most of the time. Uncle Vernon was not pleased with Dudley's tail. He has been quicker to anger lately and his chores are starting to add up. But at least he hasn't been cuffed on the head since he came back. That is something. Now if only they would feed him better.

But he is having trouble sleeping, despite the work he does during the day. The words just keep circling. He can't help it. Does this mean his Aunt and Uncle are wrong? Does this mean he isn't a Freak after all? They lied about his parents. Could they be lying about this as well? And if they are, does this mean he has a chance to have a normal life? Well, not completely normal, he does have magic after all. But so do other people. Kids his age. Will he be able to have friends? What if... what if he is able to meet his soulmate?

He traces the two names on his wrist. Surely they are both wizards. It makes sense, doesn't it? Why would his soulmate not have magic? Soulmates are suppose to complete each other. They can hardly be complete if one of them lives in a world the other can't understand or be a part of. So maybe, just maybe, he will be able to meet his soulmate. The thought makes him grin happily.

Draco Malfoy
Tom Riddle

He will be seeing them soon.
Nothing ever works out the way you expect. There is no way to meddle with the future. Even Prophesies are mere predictions, dependent on human action. It is one big game of cause and effect. How will you act?

Harry sits in the compartment, curled up by the window with a book in his hands. He is happy to finally be able to read. At this rate, he is not going to be able to learn the rules in time. He just hopes the punishments aren't too harsh. He can handle cleaning and missing meals, but he doesn't know if those are the standard punishments or if it is something more.

He has heard stories of canings and spankings at his old school. Not that he had ever heard of anyone who ever was. But what if they do here? He isn't afraid of pain, but it is not something he relishes either. Dudley and his gang had caught him enough times for him to know that. Harry Hunting was only fun if you weren't Harry.

So he is reading as much as he can. He had thanked the two older boys for the help and then slipped quietly away from them. He did like them. They seemed nice. But he isn't sure about the rest of their family. The mother... hugged him. And the boy was talking excitedly about 'Harry Potter being on the train, can you believe it?' He is glad his scar was hidden beneath his hair.

He is glad his hair is long enough to hide it. It is always long enough to hide it. No matter how his Aunt tries to cut it, it always grows back. But he has long grown used to hiding it and that looks like that won't be changing.

He hopes he can talk to the twins again, though. He is curious about the tarantula. It might almost be as cool as a snake. Snakes are Harry's favorite animal. He likes talking to the grass snakes he finds in the garden. And talking to that big snake at the zoo was wicked. He hopes he is alright, with the climate difference here.

He also thinks they might have seen his scar anyways, but they didn't say anything.

"Hello again," a voice interrupts him. The boy from the robe shop. "Mind if I join you?"

Harry shake his head.

The boy sits down. "What a let down," he complains, "Everyone on the train is saying about how Harry Potter is on it, but no one seems to be able to find him."

"Do you want to?" he asks quietly.

"Of course I do, but it doesn't look like that will be happening. He is famous, he should be easier to find then this."

"What if he doesn't want to be found?"

"Why wouldn't he?" he sounds genuinely confused, "He is a celebrity! He can be the center of attention. I know if I were that famous, I would want to be. But enough, what are you reading?"

Harry holds up his book.

"An introduction to the Wizarding World? You said both of your parents were magic. Why are you reading *that*?"
“They were, but I was raised by my Muggle relatives.”

He shudders. “Oh that sounds horrifying. How could you stand it? But I can tell you what you need to know. Both of my parents are magic and they raised me.”

Harry looks at the boy for a moment, before saying in a soft voice. “Thank you, but no thank you.”

The boy rears back, clearly offended. “And why not?”

“Because you have a strong bias. I want information, not opinions.”

“They are facts.”

“Not everyone is Slytherin and... Pureblood?”

“Pureblood yes. And of course not everyone is. We are the best and not everyone can be the best,” he boasts.

Harry gives him a pointed look.

“Fine,” he huffs, “if you think my opinion is so worthless, I'll leave.” And he does just that, pouting like Dudley when he doesn't get his way. At least he doesn't cry and scream and hit. Harry usually ended up being the thing he hit.

Harry shrugs his shoulder and goes back to his book.

But in the back of his mind, he wonders if something important just happened.

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The more things change, the more they stay the same.

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“Malfoy, Draco.”

Harry jerks his head up at the name. Draco Malfoy. One of the names on his wrist. There, walking towards the stool is the boy with blonde hair that Harry has met twice already. Oh no. He is one of them? The boy had ignored him in the Great Hall, not even glancing his way. What if he hates Harry? What if he is really Harry’s soulmate and he already hates him? But then again, there is no guarantee. He could be his enemy instead. In which case, it doesn't matter if he already hates him. He was destined to anyways.

“Slytherin!” the hat shouts before it is all the way on his head. Well, he was right about knowing where he belongs. He struts over to his table, head held high.

More names and then “Potter, Harry.”

Whispers break out across the Hall. Everyone cranes their head to get a good look at him. He stares determinedly down at the ground, trying to ignore them. Their eyes burn holes into him.

“Alright Potter?” the stern looking Professor McGonagall asks.
He nods and she places that hat down on his head. It covers his eyes and he can no longer see the Hall, only feel their eyes on him.

"Well, well, well. What have we here? Oh you are a complicated one, aren't you? Now where shall I place you?" a voice in his mind asks.


"Why ever not? Oh I see, this is about that Malfoy boy. Let me give you a piece of advice. Never let anyone have that much control over you. This will shape the next seven years of your life. Don't let one encounter deter you from finding your place. You can be great in Slytherin."

"Can I be great in another House?" What the hat is saying makes sense, but he would still like to keep his options open.

"Mmmmm, you do have the bravery of a Gryffindor. But bravery does not always mean survival, does it?"

"No," He knows that very well. He has been taught that very well.

"Either House will teach you something different. It is all a matter of which you value more. In Slytherin, you will learn to survive. In Gryffindor, you will learn to be a hero. So which is it? A hero or a survivor?"

"...survivor..." he whispers, even in his mind.

"Slytherin!" the hat announces to the shocked crowd.

Harry walks to the table cautiously. Draco Malfoy turns his nose up at him. The others follow. He sits at the end of the table, a safe distance from the others. On the other side of the Hall, the boy Weasley looks away, but the twins wink at him. At the high table, the Professor with the long black hair and forbidding expression glares at him. His scar burns.

It is going to be a long year.

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Slytherin House Rule Number One: Slytherin is Family. You must look out for each other because no one else will. The rest of the school will be against you because of our 'Dark' reputation.

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"My Father was right. You aren't my soulmate, you are my enemy!"

"Ah if it isn't our very own celebrity, Mr Potter."

"House traitor. How dare you go to the slimy snakes?"

"Mudblood."

"You aren't welcome here. Why don't you go back where you belong?"
“Freak.”

_Freak._

New words echo in Harry’s head now. Words of hate and bitterness. It is as if people are going out of their way to make sure he knows he _isn’t_ welcome. Nothing he does seems to be right. He cannot figure out the rules to this new world. The sorting hat was wrong. He didn’t belong in Slytherin.

He didn’t belong anywhere.

Draco led a campaign against him in Slytherin. The Gryffindors naturally hated him. The Ravenclaws looked down on him for some strange reason. The Hufflepuffs were indifferent towards him. His Head of House hated him. His DADA Professor gave him a headache that lasted through his entire class, as soon as he walked into the room, with the aftereffects lasting until lunch. The other Professors were cautious. Worst of all, he could find no student named Tom Riddle in the school. He had no one.

He had felt a small flicker of hope when the Prefects told them the Slytherin House Rules, especially number one. He couldn’t help it. A family is all he has ever wanted – people who loved and accepted him. Or even just one. He doesn’t mean to be selfish, really he doesn’t, so even just one person who loved him would be fine. Or even just liked him for who he was – not because he was the Boy-Who-Lived, but just Harry.

But no. He should have learned long ago that no one would ever love him. He did learn that. But for that brief moment, he couldn’t help the hope that bloomed within him. Naturally that’s what made it even more painful when he was proven wrong.

His Housemates followed the letter of the rule. They always surrounded him during the day. He was never left alone. They would protect him if he was attacked during this time, no matter how superficial that protection was. They appeared to help him in lessons, helping him with tips and patience. To the rest of the school, he was just one small snake among many.

What they did not see was that the protection was paper thin. He did end up hurt in some of those attacks, even as he kept his mouth shut about it. They didn’t notice that the supposed help in class were actually taunts and sneers about his intelligence. They were as bad as Dudley ever was. Worse because there was only one of his cousin, not a House full. They didn’t know that he was tossed aside as soon as they entered the common room. He was unwelcome there, an outcast among those who were supposed to be his family.

In short, Harry soon realized that this so called family was more like the Dursley's than he had thought. It was ironic – those same Witches and Wizards who proclaimed to hate Muggles acted very much like the ones Harry knew. They hated him and bullied him and hurt him in all the same ways as his other so-called family.

Harry retreated to the library. He had never been one for learning before. Or rather, he was heavily discouraged from learning before with fists and hunger. But here, he was encouraged to do the opposite. He was told in no uncertain terms that stupidity was not tolerated and was considered a failure to Slytherin. Any failed mark was taken up with their Head of House personally.

So he found himself a hidden corner in the library and got to work. It was something he quite actually enjoyed. He had always been a curious boy, no matter how much of that curiosity he had to suppress before Hogwarts. And he hoped that some of this information would help him with the new rules of this world.
Besides that, it was the only time he felt truly safe. It was the only time his Housemates would leave him alone for one thing. They would sneer at him and abandon him as soon as he set foot into the room. Apparently they decided he was safe enough. And if he did get in trouble, the most Professor Snape would do was take his displeasure out on the boy through detention. He wouldn't punish the rest of the House by taking points. So what did it matter?

The other Houses left him alone as well. The librarian was fierce, although she seemed to develop a soft spot for him. It made his lips twitch sometimes, because he was the only one. With everyone else, Madame Pince was strict and scary.

He could be himself within that hidden corner where no one ever found him. Even if being himself wasn't all that great, he was away from the expectations and the sneers and the taunts and the attacks that plagued him through the rest of the school.

Books became his haven. Soon Harry was sure he could rival a Ravenclaw with his knowledge and the time he spent in the library. Or maybe not quite. But he certainly knew everything that the noisy bushy haired Gryffindor did, even if he never showed it off like she did.

Harry thought she was trying to prove her intelligence in the wrong way. No one likes a know-it-all. He almost felt sorry for her, but she had to learn that on her own. Knowledgeable people are not hated, but show offs are. And those who make other people feel stupid just by being around them. Besides, how has she not figure out she is not letting other people learn by stealing all the answers?

And so a routine of isolation and loneliness and knowledge is formed.

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A House divided cannot stand. But is it really divided if it is one against the rest?

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One month in and he ignored them.

Two months in and bore it.

Three months in and it begun to wear on him.

Four months in and he walked around face blank and forward.

By Christmas break, he broke.

He was the only one who stayed in his House. That detail had been heavily emphasized in the past week. The laughter haunted his sleep. And then, on Christmas morning, he had woken up to find two gifts sitting on his trunk. One was an invisibility cloak that had apparently been his Father's. The other... it was what he had thought was a present. He had been so excited. At least two, or maybe one very generous, person cared enough to get him something.

But no.

It had been a prank. Inside had been a number of dug bombs that exploded across the room. Not only that, but... shite... had gone everywhere. Including him. He had scrubbed his skin until it was
red and raw. Little creatures called house elves assured him they would take care of the room. But by that point, he didn't care. He couldn't take it anymore. This was worse than the Dursleys because at least there he hadn't had any hope. Here... here he had and now it was crushed.

Once his skin started to bleed from his washing, he dried off and fled the room. He couldn't bare another moment there. It was clear he didn't belong. He didn't go to the Great Hall, but wandered the halls for hours. He lost track of the time after a while. He also became lost himself. He resorted to simply opening doors in hope of finding someone. Anyone. Even Filch.

And that's when he found it. The mirror. The first time he had seen his parents. The first time he saw people who loved him. He sat down and stared. Just stared. This is where he belong, with them. Not out there. He would never belong out there.

A hand startles him. He falls forward to get away from it.

“Careful now,” a voice warns.

Harry turns and gasps. There, kneeling behind him is Professor Black, Professor Snape's partner. He is a handsome and charming man, the opposite of the Potions Master. Harry has never interacted with Professor Black much outside of astronomy class. In fact he didn't interact with him at all. He never signaled him out like Snape did, but he never helped him either. He was just another student in that class. It was nice.

But if his partner hated Harry, surely he must hate him as well.

He backs away slowly until his back hits the mirror.

“Easy now, it's fine. I'm not here to hurt you,” Professor Black reassures in a soft voice. “We were worried when you never showed up for any of the meals today. I volunteered to come and find you. Are you alright?”

Harry looks down and nods. “Sorry,” he murmurs, “I didn't mean to be a bother Sir.”

“No, I'm sure you didn't. Tell me Mr Potter, do you know what this mirror is?”

He shakes his head.

“It is the Mirror of Erised. It is a dangerous artifact that shows you your heart's deepest desire.”

“How is it dangerous Sir?”

“Tell me Mr Potter, how long have you been sitting here?”

“I'm not sure. Not long Sir?”

“Supper has past.”

Harry looks up, startled. “It has?”

“Indeed. Now let us get you some food and then to your bed. I will have the Headmaster move this blasted mirror to a safer place. Come along now.”

“Yes Sir.”
Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.

The months after break were better. He was still ignored, but the ridicule and the jeers stopped. He was still alone, but at least no one made fun of him anymore. Not in his hearing anyways. They must have gotten bored with him. And he is fine with that. He will take what he can get.

He thinks he is finally getting some of the rules right. Keep your head down, don't draw attention to yourself, don't stand out – those are still the same. But, learn how to write with a quill, always do your best work, learn all you can, explore the school so you do not get lost again, be nice to the house elves, expect to be found wanting in everything, don't react, don't let them see your weakness – some of those are the same, but some are different.

Another thing has changed as well. Professor Black now invites him to his office for tea and a chat every week. He helps him with his homework, shows him how to use a quill, lets him talk about the things he needs to, offers him support. It is the most help he has ever received from any adult. It is... nice.

But Harry keeps his eyes open. Because he can't be doing this for nothing. Everyone wants something. Nothing is free in this world. Every adult has let Harry down eventually. So he will take advantage of him now and watch so he will know when this goodwill will come to an end. When the price will become too high for him to pay.

That is when he will run. Never let them catch you, it never means anything good. It is a very Slytherin outlook. The hat was right. He is learning to survive in this House. He is not sure about becoming great, but he is surviving. But there was one thing the hat did not mention.

Survival does not mean happiness. It breeds endurance, but not contentment. He may be alive, but he is not truly living yet.

Still, this is the lot he chose. He will see it out. He will watch and he will observe and he will wait. Because no one cares for him for long. Case in point: the end of this school year.

Danger lurks around every corner. Always be on your guard.

“Ah, M-mr Pot-potter,” his DADA Professor stutters as he walks towards him.

Harry turns. His head starts to ache. He had been wandering the halls by himself, having given his Housemates the slip. Not that it was terribly hard. They still don't care for him, even if they uphold the image they do. “Yes Sir?” he asks quietly, eyes down.

“I am in need of some assistance. You will do nicely.”
The boy looks up, startled. Professor Quirrell's voice just... changed. He didn't add one extra syllable to that sentence. He has a bad feeling about this. The feeling is proven right when Professor Quirrell raises his wand and he is hit with a flash of light. Everything goes dark.

He wakes up in a stone cold chamber. His head hurts even worse than before. He feels disoriented.

“Good, you are awake. Welcome Mr Potter,” his Professor greets, still talking in a different voice.

He looks up from where he is laying on the ground.

“Come,” he is grabbed and dragged in front of a mirror. The Mirror of Erised. A chill goes through him. Why is he here? As he looks, the scene is different than before. Instead of seeing his parents, he sees himself, older, with another man beside him. He instantly knows this unknown man is his soulmate. The man smiles at him and reaches into his pocket and pulls out a stone. He then drops it into Harry's pocket and winks.

Harry feels something heavy land in his own pocket, as if his soulmate put it into his instead of his reflection's trousers.

“I am told you have some experience with this Mirror. What do you see?” he demands harshly.

He instinctively knows not to mention the stone. Something is wrong here. Very, very wrong. “My soulmate,” he whispers, “me and my soulmate. We're happy.”

“And what else?” the hold on his shoulder tightens, going from tight to painful.

“Nothing.”

“Foolish boy,” he is thrown away, landing hard on the stone floor, “Do you even know why you are here?”

He shakes his head.

“This is the last protection keeping the Philosopher's Stone safe.”

The Philosopher's Stone. The Stone that grants immortality and riches. Why is it here of all places? In a school full of children. Why isn't it someplace safe?

Professor Quirrell scoffs at him. “You don't have a clue in the slightest, do you boy? What a disappointment. But you're use to that by now, aren't you? The Boy-Who-Lived, a Slytherin, an outcast, a Freak. You don't belong anywhere. You are shunned by the entire school. Why would you know about this?”

The words hurt, but they are true. This isn't anything Harry hasn't heard before. Hasn't thought of himself. The truth can be a powerful weapon. It can cut deeper than any knife. It certainly does in this case. It is a wonder he hasn't bled to death by now. He has heard it so many times.

“Shouldn't the precious Boy-Who-Lived by able to get the Stone? If you do, I'll give you a reward. I can bring you fame, fortune. I can show you the place you belong.”

And oh, how tempting that sounds. A place to belong. Somewhere he fits in. It's too bad he doesn't believe his Professor in the slightest. No one has ever done anything nice for him. Only Professor Black seems to care, a little. But he is still waiting for the price for his support, so that doesn't count. Not until he knows what he has to pay.
That is lesson number one in his life: Trust no adult.

It is shortly followed by: Trust no one at all. Always be on your guard. Nothing is for free. Those four rules at the core of his belief. His view of the world. He hasn't been proven wrong once. Those rules always hold true. So why should they be wrong now?

The pain in his head increases even more. He has to grit his teeth to keep from whimpering. He is used to pain, but this is getting bad. It is getting intense. How much longer can this go on?

He is seized again and brought in front of the Mirror. “So what do you see?”

“I don't see the stone,” he whispers. And he's telling the truth. He doesn't. He's already seen it.

“He's lying,” a voice hisses.

The voice sends a shiver down Harry's spine. It sounds like a monster. Where is it coming from?

“Master,” Professor Quirrell whimpers and oh, this isn't good.

“Let me talk to him,” the monster repeats.

Harry is released and he tries to make a run for it. But he is frozen before he can. He can't move a muscle. He can't even blink. The feeling of dread that has been building even since this began increases to the point that if Harry could move, he would have sicked up. His stomach is in turmoil. He head feels like it is about to explode.

Professor Quirrell removes his turban and what Harry sees will surely give him nightmares. There is a face in the back of Professor Quirrell's head. A face. And a deformed one at that.

“Harry Potter, we meet at last,” the voice says to him.

“Who are you?” he asks softly, barely even a whisper.

“Don't you know who I am?” he sneers arrogantly, “I am the Great Lord Voldemort.”

Harry doesn't know about the great part, but Lord Voldemort. This is the evil wizard that killed his parents. Who tried to kill him. He trembles internally.

“Yes, take a good look. This is what you have reduced me to. But no more. With the stone I will be great again. I will continue my reign. And I will not be denied by the outcast of my glorious House. You are a smear to the name of Slytherin. Give me the stone.”

He just stares in horror and a tiny bit of exasperation. What does the monster expect him to do? He can't move. He is still frozen. But then he is hit with another unknown spell and he can move. “I don't have it,” he insists.

“I have heard what Quirrell said to you. I will uphold that promise. I will show you where you belong. Just give me the stone.”

He shakes his head.

“Idiot child,” he hisses, “you are no match for me. I will have that stone, one way or another.”

That tiny part of Harry's mind kindly reminds him that clearly he is more of a challenge than he seems. How else did he defeat him the first time. Harry always ignores that part of him mind. It gives him nothing but trouble. He has long since learned never to act on it. But it does make itself known
rarely. And now is certainly not a good time. He just shakes his head harder.

“Insolent boy!” Voldemort thunders and for one brief second, he sounds exactly like Professor Snape. The thought terrifies him even more. As much as this monster scares him, Professor Snape scares him more. He wonders what that says, about the man.

Quirrell, or is it Voldemort, stalks over to him in a fit of rage. Harry now knows he is going to die. He just hopes it is quick. Voldemort, or is it Quirrell, grabs him by the neck. But before he can squeeze too hard, he jerks back.

“Ow!” he exclaims. His hands are burnt. Quirrell had always touched him on his shoulder, where his clothes covered him, before. Now that he has touched bare skin, it seems as if he is unable to.

“Do it you fool,” Voldemort orders.

Professor Quirrell grips his neck again, squeezing it tightly.

“This is where you belong boy. Dead,” Voldemort sneers, although it sounds strained. It must be because Professor Quirrell is in pain.

Harry claws at the hands, trying to pry them off. But it is no use. His vision is beginning to fade. Desperately he reaches up and touches Quirrell’s, Voldemort’s, face. The man screams in pain, but doesn’t release him. Neither does Harry. The last thing he hears before he passes out is the monster screaming.

Life is filled with the unexpected. The strange. It is impossible to explain, to understand, everything. No matter how hard you try. Somethings happen for a reason. Some reactions don't make sense, no matter how hard you try to explain them.

Harry wakes up in the Hospital Wing. His entire body aches. It feels as if his cousin has played three games of Harry Hunting with him. Right in a row. He makes a soft noise at the back of his throat.

“What happened? Why is he here? Did someone curse him?”

“Mr Potter,” the nurse, Madam Pomfrey, greets, “how do you feel?”

“Fine Ma’am,” he knows better than to complain.

“Do you remember why you are here?” she asks.

He shakes his head slowly.

“Well, hopefully it will come back to you. Although I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't. You have been unconscious for five days now.”

Five days? What in the world happened to him?

“Now time for your potions. Here,” she hands him the first of four. He makes a face at the taste, but swallows them without a word of protest. No whining.
“Very good. Now get some more rest,” she tells him as his eyes slide shut, “you need the rest.”

The next time he wakes up, someone is sitting beside him. The Headmaster. “Harry, my boy” he greets, eyes twinkling. His eyes always seem to twinkle. “It is good to see you finally awake. We were getting worried.”

Harry is instantly on guard. ‘Harry’? ‘My boy’? The Headmaster has never paid any special attention to him before. In fact, he has always had the impression that the Headmaster is one of those who are disappointed with the way he turned out. He feels deeply uneasy around the man and wishes Madam Pomfrey would ask him to leave. His gut twists. This is not a wizard he wants to cross, but he is afraid he already has. Why is he paying attention to Harry now? Is it because he has shown he can be useful? He doubts that anyone was actually worried, but doesn't say it. “Thank you Sir,” he says instead, looking down.

“Now, Madam Pomfrey has said you do not remember what has occurred, last she spoke with you. Do you remember now?”

Harry thinks hard on it. “Professor Quirrell, Sir,” he says slowly, “he... did something and... the Philosopher's Stone? Then... Voldemort, yes, Voldemort was in the back of his head. He tried to use me to get... the stone. And then he tried to kill me. But I... I burnt him.”

“Very good my boy. Yes indeed, Quirrell and Voldemort united to get the Philosopher's Stone. We found you both in the final chamber some time later. I see my plan worked as well.”

Plan? “Sir?”

“What? Only those who do not seek the stone could retrieve it. I had found it in your pocket and have already returned it to its original owners.”

“And Professor Quirrell, Sir? What happened to him?”

“I am afraid he is dead Harry.”

What?!

“This burning you spoke of. It is an effect of your Mother's protection. You see, when Lily sacrificed herself to save you, not only did it reflect the curse, it also put a powerful protection spell over you. Voldemort will be unable to touch you. This protection is also what enables you to be safe at your relative's house. Because Petunia is of Lily's blood, blood wards can be cast. As long as you call that house home, you will be safe.”

Harry stares at the sheets, determined not to think too hard about what the Headmaster just said. He nods his understanding. “Thank you Sir,” he says.

“Get well soon my boy,” the older man says as he leaves.

When he is gone, Harry allows himself to think. Professor Quirrell is dead. Harry killed him with his touch. He is a murderer for a second time now. First he killed Voldemort as a baby. Now he has killed his Professor as an eleven year old.

Murderer.

Freak.

Obviously Uncle Vernon was right to tell him he has bad blood running through his veins. Uncle
Vernon. Aunt Petunia. Blood wards. As long as he calls the Dursley's house home, he is safe. Does he call that place home? He must, or the protection wouldn't have worked. But what if the protection and the wards are separate things? Harry doesn't consider that place a home. It is where he lives, yes, but it not his home.

He has no home.

But maybe that is enough? He does live there, sleep there, work there. Maybe that is enough for the wards? Because that place is not home. A home is a place you are welcomed and loved. He is neither. He is an unwanted burden and a Freak besides.

Voldemort was right. There is only one place he belongs. Dead.

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Even the smallest acts of kindness can have great effects. It's a shame that so many people don't bother.

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No one cares about Harry. Not for long, if ever. He spent two extra days in the Hospital Wing before he attended the Leaving Feast. The Headmaster was his only visitor during that period. Not even Professor Black came. Or even sent a card. Nothing.

He is shipped off to his relative's house without a thought. No one cares. No one cares if he has nightmares about what happened. No one cares if he is scared about what he is capable of. No one cares he killed a man. His Professor. No one cares about Harry Potter.

He is not worth it.

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There is a difference between placing a child in a home where you know he will be safe and not grow up arrogant or self-important and placing him in a home where he is raised to have no self-esteem. The first is practical. The second is deadly. Too bad no one bothered to check which one it was.
Year 2

Chapter Summary

In which students are attacked, possible friends are made and things get a bit worse.

The summer started out as any other for Harry. He was picked up late by his relatives, his trunk was shoved into his old room and locked and he was given a list of chores. This wasn't anything unexpected. He just wishes they would let him have his books and parchment. He has homework.

But of course telling them this would be a mistake. They will definitely keep his school work from him then. They might even go so far as destroying it so it is forever out of reach. Best to keep quiet about it. He can always do it on the train.

It started out the same. But it did not end the same. A house elf is currently in the process of making trouble for him. He didn't realize at first. He knew magic was happening, but he couldn't figure out why. He wasn't doing it. Now that he knows about accidental magic, he can tell if he did something or not. And he isn't.

Still magic was happening and he is getting blamed. Then, when the house elf finally showed himself, well. Things got interesting. He had been sitting on his bed, locked in, when he appeared.

“Mr Harry Potter sirs,” he squeaks, “Dobby has heard tales of your greatness.”

“You must not have heard anything about me recently then. No one thinks I'm great anymore.”

“Oh nos, sir, you is great! And that is whys yous can't returns to Hogwarts this year. Mr Harry Potter sirs is in grave danger.”

Harry stares at the little creature. Not go back to Hogwarts? He can't do that. Hogwarts is his escape from here. Yes, he is trading one hell to another. But not go back at all? Never? He can't do that. He has no future here. Maybe, if he gets really really lucky, he might after he graduates Hogwarts. He shakes his head. “I can't.” he says.

“Yous must. Master is plotting somethings bad.”

“Master? Who do you belong to?”

“Dobby can't say. Dobby is bad elf. Can't speak bad of Master. Bad, bad, bad,” he pulls his ears harshly.

“Stop that,” Harry says, “and be quiet. You don't want my relatives to hear you.”

“Yeses Mr Harry Potter sirs, Dobby has seen bad relatives. Bad like Master. No, bad Dobby,” he starts hitting himself in the head with his fist.

“Dobby,” he says sharply and the elf stops, “no. If you know how my relatives are like then you know why I can't stay here.”

“Theys treats the great Mr Harry Potter sirs like bad house elf.”
“Exactly,” he agrees, “so you know why I can't stay here.”

“But Mr Harry Potter sirs will be killed at Hogwarts,” Dobby cries.

Harry shrugs. “And my relatives will probably kill me if I stay here.”

Dobby wrings his hands, clearly unhappy.

He sighs. “Dobby, if you had a choice between staying with a Master that is bad and obviously punishes you and a new place that is just as bad, but you don't have to be around your Master, what would you choose? A known fear or a new danger?”

“Dobby wants to be free of bad Master sirs, but Master only frees if Dobby is given clothes.”

Harry nods. “Then you see why I have to go back to Hogwarts. It may be dangerous, but so is living here. And at least I am away from my 'bad Master',” he quotes.

Dobby nods. “I bes understanding. Yous needs hope.”

Harry smiles bitterly, but doesn't correct him. “Thank you Dobby.”

“Oh! Oh Mr Harry Potter sirs is thanking me! Mr Harry Potter sirs is great wizard,” the elf gushes.

Harry's smile gets a little more real and a little bit happier. The irony of the situation does not escape him. He is able to convince Dobby not to cause trouble because he is able to relate to the abused house elf. Because, here, that is exactly what he is.

“Dobby, maybe, if it won't get you in too much trouble, you can help me this year,” he says softly.

“Oh!” he repeats, “Oh Mr Harry Potter sirs is wanting my help! Yeses Mr Harry Potter sirs. Dobby can helps the great Mr Harry Potter sirs! It would be honor to serve yous Mr Harry Potter sirs.”

He shakes his head. “No, not serve. I'm not your Master. Maybe we can be... friends instead?” He doesn't know what makes him offer. Yes, he doesn't want a servant, but why would he ask Dobby to be his friend? That's a stupid idea, why would Dobby say-

“ Oh yeses Mr Harry Potter sirs. The great Mr Harry Potter sirs wants to be Dobby's friend. No wizard is friends with house elves. But Mr Harry Potter sirs wants to be friends! Mr Harry Potter sirs is great ,” the elf is beside himself with excitement.

“Friends,” Harry repeats.

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And that is how Harry Potter got his first friend.

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After Harry's talk with Dobby, things get a little bit better. Or, rather, they go back to the ways things were. The house elf doesn't visit again, so he is left alone with his relatives. He doesn't mind. He probably can't come too often without drawing attention to himself. And it's not as if Harry expects him to visit often. Why would he?
And so the summer goes on. The most exciting part is when Hagrid takes him to Diagon Alley to get his supplies again. The man is much less friendly this time and Harry is reminded of his opinions of Slytherins. He probably hates him now too.

By time Harry boards the train, he is a little scrawnier, a little more burnt from the sun and a little more scruffier than usual. Things he can fix when he gets to school. He is almost late, because his Uncle didn't want to take him. He complains the entire way, while Harry keeps his head down.

As a result, all the compartments are full when he goes looking for one. He ends up sitting with a group of first years. He keeps his head down, still, and his scar covered, so none of them know who he is. At first, they think he is another first year. He is the same size of them after all. But then he pulls out his books and they realize he is already a student. They seem almost in awe of him and don't speak to him after that.

All except one small firstie with blonde hair, radish earrings and vacant eyes. Her look makes you think she is not all there. Or maybe that's just what she wants people to think. People underestimate you that way. It's a safety Harry has never been able to use. He is a target, no matter what he does.

“Be careful of Nargles. They seem to like you,” she warns seriously before going back to staring at nothing. Harry shrugs it off and then gets to work on his homework.

During the feast, he only looks up long enough to note the odd girl is Sorted into Ravenclaw before going back to his reading. No one talks to him. No one looks at him. No one acknowledges him. It makes him feel invisible, but it is still better than last year. Sometimes invisibility is the only protection you have.

He stays up all night, finishing his work. By time breakfast is served, he is exhausted. But he is use to being tired. He is use to long hours. His relatives never cared if he was well rested after all. They just cared that he has completed his chores.

They didn't care about the nightmares either, as long as he didn't wake them up with his screaming. Then Uncle Vernon had something to... say... about it. A rather hard lesson, but one he learned well. He has a scar from his teeth between his thumb and forefinger now. It is better than the alternative. He flexes his back in remembrance.

The first thing he learns that school year is the silencing charm. He casts it around his bed each night religiously. No need to add to the problem. He only wishes he could have done this sooner.

His housemates continue to surround him during the day and abandon him at night. Professor Snape continues to sneer and mock him. The rest of the school continues to bully or ignore him. As he told Dobby, he has traded one Hell for another. One of his choosing.

Although he would choose Professor Snape over Professor Lockhart any day. He makes Harry deeply uncomfortable. His gut twists when he enters the DADA classroom. No one else seems to have a problem with him. Half of the girls have a crush on him. Other students roll their eyes and mock him. No one learns anything besides the man's favorite color.

But then again, no one else had a problem with Professor Quirrell either and look how that turned out. At least he doesn't make his scar hurt.

But the way he looks at Harry... He doesn't know what it means. But he doesn't like it. And he refuses to be alone with the man. Who knows what he will try to do? Maybe it is because Harry is the Boy-Who-Lived. Maybe because he is the hero who was Sorted into Slytherin. Maybe it is something else. He doesn't know. And he doesn't want to find out either.
Adults are not to be trusted.

Professor Black doesn't talk to him until a month has gone by. Until a routine is formed again. He doesn't ask Harry how he is doing. They both know that. But they talk about other things. School things. Nothing important. Nothing that can be used against him. He makes sure of that. He still doesn't know what the Professor wants. But the man insists on keeping these meetings a secret, so he is always on his guard.

Worse yet, he thinks he is going crazy. He keeps hearing voices in the walls. 'Kill. Rip. Shred. Blood.' It chills him to the bone. But no one else ever hears it. Even when he is surrounded by people, he is the only one. His relatives had made their thoughts plain about people who hear voices no one else can. They belong in an asylum. If he tells anyone, is that where they will send him? Does the Wizarding World have asylums?

He has heard stories about old asylums. About the treatments that were used. About how people were tortured in the name of science and health. He doesn't want to end up in a place like that. His Uncle has threatened before. When he did something freaky. It was the orphanage when he was bad. It was the asylum when he did something freaky.

He still hasn't seen Dobby, but he isn't worried about it. It would be nice to talk to someone occasionally, but he doesn't need that. He has survived this long without a friend. He can go longer. And who is to say Dobby would make a good friend? He recognizes it as self-preservation now. Get the elf on his side so he is not against him. He doesn't know what house elves are capable of, but he has a feeling having one for an enemy – even if he doesn't call himself one – would be bad.

He is on his way to the common room, alone since he was in the library, when the staircase moves. He lets out a squeak and holds on. He hates when they move while he is still on them. He is afraid of falling off. When they come to a stop, he walks off quickly and looks around. He doesn't know where he is. Great. Even after a year, this school is still a maze.

He takes a right at random and begins to walk. He'll figure it out eventually. He always does. It's a stupid system. Moving staircases, classrooms that like to rearrange themselves. Ghosts that like to chase you. This isn't just a school. This is a training camp. Survival of the fittest.

And speaking of ghosts. He recognizes where he is at now. The girl's loo that no one uses because of the ghost that lives in there, Moaning Myrtle. Everyone complains about how weird she is. And creepy. Harry thinks it must be lonely, but he has never talked to her before. He has never had a reason to. Just because he thinks she must be lonely, doesn't mean he is the one going to keep her company. He has enough problems without worrying about someone else's.

And so the year goes on. He feels like a ghost himself at times. Like he isn't even there. Disconnected from the world. Nothing is real. But then someone pushes him into the wall. Or he hears the whispers and laughter behind him. And he is reminded that everything is all too real.

His nightmares slowly, ever so slowly, ease up. Nothing bad happens and he thinks that maybe he is alright. He may have bad blood, but it won't affect his everyday life. He still killed a man. He is still a murderer twice over. But maybe nothing else will happen again.

And then the attacks begin.
An outcast person in a House full of outcasts. That doesn't leave many places for one to go. No one is to be trusted. No place is safe. Keep your eyes to the ground and your wits about you. Anything can happen when you least expect it.

Harry is the one who finds it. Or rather, her. Mrs Norris is frozen on the floor, not moving. Still. Much too still. The ground is wet below them. The wall above her reads 'The Chamber of Secrets opens again. Enemies of the Heir beware.' The writing looks like it is in blood.

“What have you done?” Filch screeches at him, “What have you done to my poor kitty?” He gently picks her up and turns his glare onto him.

Harry backs up slowly, ready to run at a moment's notice. “Nothing,” he protests, even though he knows he won't be believed. Truth is, he likes Mrs Norris. It isn't something he would tell anyone, even if he had someone to talk to. But he does. He has played with the ugly cat sometimes. She is a good listener when he desperately needs one. He knows the other students hate her. They like to play tricks on her. But Harry actually likes her.

And she likes him, oddly enough. He never thought she would like anyone but Filch. But she likes Harry. And now something has happen to her.

“You filthy little liar. You little beasts are always doing something to my poor kitty. Now tell me what before I hang you up my your toes!”

“I didn't do anything. Honest,” he backs up farther as Filch advances.

“Liar!” he screams, “Disgusting little creature. Maybe a good whipping will get you talking.”


“That's what they all say boy. That's what they all say.”

He flinches, hard. He isn't going to get out of this in one piece.

“What is going on here?” a voice demands. Professor McGonagall. He isn't sure whether to be thankful or not. She may be fair, but she is strict and scary. And he has always gotten the feeling that she is disappointed in him for not being in her House. Professors Snape, Black and the Headmaster are with her.

“This little beast has done something to poor Mrs Norris,” Filch tells them.

Harry shakes his head, but doesn't say a word. It is no use. Even if Professor Black is here, he doesn't think it will do any good. He doubts the man would protect him, even if he was acknowledging him.

Professor Snape sneers. “I doubt it was Potter.”

He jumps in surprise. Is Professor Snape really going to defend him?

“He has the brains of a flobberworm and the skill of a toad.”

Oh. Of course he isn't. He is just going to insult him. The man can't pass up an opportunity. Still, he was the one to speak up. Could it actually mean something? He raises his head from the ground high
enough from the floor to catch the Professor eyes. He scowls. No, it doesn't. What a stupid thought.

Stupid hope.

Professor McGonagall waves her wand over Mrs Norris. “She's petrified,” she announces, “something perfectly remedied as long as we have mature mandrake root available. I shall ask Professor Sprout how long until they are ready.”

Harry let's out a quiet sigh of relief. She is going to be alright.

The Headmaster examines the writing on the wall. “Tell me, my boy,” and here is the uncomfortable familiarity again. He is not the Headmaster's boy. He is not anyone's boy, “did you see anything when you arrived?”

“No sir.”

“And where were you coming from, exactly?”

“The library Sir. I was on my way to supper.”

“All alone?”

“Yes Sir.”

“And can anyone confirm your whereabouts?”

“Oh honestly Albus,” Professor McGonagall huffs.

“Madam Pince can, Sir.” Now he is beginning to get nervous. Does the Headmaster really believe he is behind this attack? Does he think he is capable? Like Professor Snape said, he doesn't have the skill. Or does he?

Does it have to do with this power he seems to have? The one that killed Professor Quirrell. The one that was deadly enough to kill Voldemort when he was only a baby. It must be a terrible power. A dangerous one. If he can kill a person, surely he can petrify a cat. He is already hearing voices. Is it a stretch to think he could have done this too without knowing it?

Bad blood.

“Really Headmaster,” Professor Snape scoffs, “insinuating Potter is responsible? Blaming a Slytherin, such a shocking development. What happen to your Hero Boy? Discarded now that he is a snake? Potter is too pathetic to have part in this.”

Harry trembles. But what if he did it without knowing? What if this power, now awakened, can take over him and do things he shouldn't be able to do?

“Severus,” Professor McGonagall warns, “but I have to agree with him.”

“That's a first,” Professor Snape mutters.

Professor McGonagall shoots him a sharp look. “This is much too advance for Mr Potter. He is just the unfortunate child who has discovered this. And this is no discussion for said child to hear either. Run along Mr Potter. Off to supper now.”

“Yes Ma'am,” he mutters and runs away before they change their minds. Dignity be damned. Pride is not worth it. He doubts he can get any lower in their eyes in any case. He is the useless hero who
was Sorted into the wrong House. He is the one with the strange power to kill a man just by touching him. He is the Freak.

The story spreads through the school like wildfire. Everyone knows what happened by the end of the day. Or thinks they know. Of course the story grows with each telling. It is exaggerated. It takes on a life of it's own. But one thing stays the same, and that is Harry himself. He is always at the center of it.

The Professors may not blame him, but the students do. They fully believe he is responsible for the attack. Things get worse after that. He is no longer a ghost, although he wishes he was.

Not even the Slytherins are enough to protect him. Not that they are trying too hard. He knows they let some of the curses hit him on purpose. They act outraged, but Harry knows that it is fake. They are thrilled when he gets hit. They laugh at him. They do it themselves. It is too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Target practice on the Freak.

He withdraws even more, if it is possible. He spends all of his time in the library now, the only place he is safe. He rushes to it's safety any time he is not in class. He could be mistaken for a Ravenclaw, with the time he is spending there. Professor Black doesn't say anything about it. It wouldn't do any good if he did. Survival of the fittest.

He hides among the shelves. Books are his safety. Books don't judge him. He can't kill them. They can't laugh at him if he has to stifle sobs. He doesn't cry. He never cries anymore. But he can still sob. Dry, tearless sobs that shake his body. They don't tell anyone how weak he is.

And then it gets worse. Professor Lockhart announces he is going to start a dueling club. Professor Snape makes it very clear they are expected to join.

So, on the appointed day, Harry joins the rest of the students, waiting for it to begin. He lingers in the back of the crowd, hoping to be invisible. In a crowded room is the last place he wants to be. Too many people to watch. Too many things that could happen.

Still, he will cherish the memory of Professor Lockhart flying into the wall by Professor Snape's disarming spell. He silently cheers his Head of House on. The Professor may hate him, but even he is preferable to Professor Lockhart. He is honest in his hate. Others are not so clear.

But then he is called up on the stage to duel Weasley, the young red head that was so excited to meet him that first train ride. Now the boy hates him, just like everyone else. He is one of the worse Gryffindors. Funny how Weasley and Malfoy hate each other, but share the same favorite pass time of tormenting Harry.

Of course he doesn't stick to the disarming spell. Harry knew he wouldn't. He was prepared for it. He disarms the boy as quickly as he can. The redhead has a mean streak that Harry does not want to be a part of right now. Or ever, really, but he doesn't have a choice most of the time.

He thinks that's it, but then Malfoy is called up on stage. Great. Another person who hates Harry. Malfoy seems to take the name on his wrist as seriously as he can. He never passes up a chance to make him miserable. Too bad Harry can't bring himself to do the same.

Professor Snape whispers something in Malfoy's ear and Harry swallows. This is not going to be good. Who knows what he told the boy. Probably a spell. And Professor Snape probably knows many that can hurt. He can make him hurt worse than Uncle Vernon and Dudley combined.
Malfy smirks, “Scared Potter?”

“You wish,” he replies, trying to sound brave. Yes. Yes, he is very scared. But he can’t show it. Never show weakness. It will always be used against you.

“Duelers ready,” Professor Lockhart announces, “One, two,”

“Serpensorta,” Malfoy shouts. A black mist comes out of the boy’s wand and forms a long, black snake on the ground. It hisses threateningly as it moves towards Harry.

“What is happening? Who are you?” it hisses.

“Allow me to get rid of it,” Professor Lockhart says.

“No!” Harry shouts, but it is too late. The snake is knocked into the air. It lands on the ground. Hard.

“Foolish two leggers, you will pay for that,” it threatens, making it’s way towards one of the students.

“Stop!” Harry tells him, “it’s not his fault. Our Professor is the one who did it. But he’s a twit. No one meant to hurt you.”

The snake turns towards him. “You are a speaker. I shall obey you this once. But should the fool try it again, I will not hesitate to bite him.” he tells the boy regally.

Harry giggles slightly at that and grins up at the student, a young Hufflepuff, who would have surely heard the snake as well. But the boy backs up in fear.

“Don’t come near me,” he says, voice shaking.

Harry looks at him in surprise. Then he realizes that he is not the only one looking at him in fear. The entire room is silent, staring at him. Their eyes burn him. He looks up at the Professors, but they are staring at him too.

Then the whispers start.

“Potter is a parslemouth.”

“Did you hear him talk to that snake?”

“I bet he told it to attack Justin.”

“He is a Slytherin. It doesn't surprise me he has a Dark gift.”

“No wonder he was able to kill You-Know-Who. He’s Dark too.”

“Potter is Dark.”

“Potter is evil.”

“Freak.”

Harry runs out the door. The students part for him, as if they are afraid he will touch them. As if he is contagious. As if he could kill them by brushing against them. He doesn’t know where he is going, all he knows he has to get away. He has to hide.
Freak.

He is gasping for breath by time he finally stops.

“Hello?” a voice greets.

Looking up, Harry sees the ghost of a young girl in front of him. Moaning Myrtle. He is in Moaning Myrtle's loo. He doesn't have the air to greet her, even if he wanted to. All he wants right now is to be left alone. All he wants is to disappear. Vanish into thin air. Die. Never have been born in the first place.

Everything is wrong. He really is a Freak. His relative were right all along. He wraps his arms tightly around himself, sobbing violently. His eyes are dry, but he can't breathe. He is trembling. His head feels as if it might explode.

Myrtle sits down in front of him. “I use to cry all the time,” she tells him, “no one really liked me. They all thought I was weird. I've never seen someone cry without tears before. Does it hurt? It sounds like it does.”

Yes, it does. His chest aches with the force of them. But he can't stop. No matter what he does, he can't stop. He curls into himself farther and lays down on the ground. He wishes the floor would open up right there, but he knows that won't happen. That would be too merciful. Freaks don't deserve mercy. They deserve everything bad that happens to them and more.

A chill runs through him and he realizes Myrtle is stroking his hair. “No one ever comes and visits me. Not Moaning Myrtle. But I'm a good listener. If you want, I can share my stall with you. No one else wants to, but you can.”

And now a ghost feels sorry for him. No one wants him, but a ghost is offering to take care of him. He continues to sob.

Eventually he stops and he takes in air in heavy gasps.

“Are you going to live? Because if not, if you want to be a ghost, you can keep me company. You seem like you need a friend. No one was my friend when I was alive. They all laughed at me.”

“No one wants me either,” he tells her hoarsely, “I'm just a Freak.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“I have bad blood. I've killed people. I can talk to snakes.”

“You're a parslemouth,” she exclaims, “there hasn't been a parslemouth in Hogwarts in fifty years. Not since I was alive. He wasn't very nice. He had cruel eyes. You don't,” she says as she looks at him closely, “your eyes just look sad.”

He closes his eyes, not wanting to see her.

“Were they bad people?”

“What?”
“The people you killed. Were they bad? I wasn't bad, but someone killed me.”

“One was Voldemort and the other was my Professor.”

“Why did you kill your Professor?”

“He was trying to kill me. He was strangling me and I touched him and he burnt up. His skin burned just by me touching him.”

“They sound like bad people. You shouldn't feel bad about killing bad people. They started it.”

“Killing people makes people bad. I've killed two.”

“And they tried first. Death puts things into perspective. I would have killed whoever killed me, if that meant I would live. Of course being a ghost isn't all that bad. You learn to like it. Still, I never graduated. I wanted to. It would have been nice.”

Harry doesn't say anything.

“People are mean. Some people deserve it.”

He doesn't move.

“Parseltongue is useful. You never know when you might need to stop a snake from killing you.”

Harry doesn't reply. Not even when she decides to start a one sided conversation. He never looks at her. Never says anything. Never really moves except for the occasional twitch. The floor is cold, but he doesn't mind. Maybe if the cold soaks in deep enough, it will numb him all the way through. That way he doesn't have to feel anything anymore.

He can be a ghost too.

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No where is safe. Except for one place. With Moaning Myrtle, he is safe. No one bothers him there. No one can find him. And anyone who gets too close, Myrtle scares off. She is thrilled to have someone share her loo with her, even if they are still living.

And slowly, ever so slowly, but surely, Myrtle becomes a friend. His second friend. First a house elf. Now a ghost. What a life he leads. But Myrtle is kind, if a bit odd and creepy. She cares. She never laughs at him. She listens. She understands.

And all she wants in return is company.

It is a novelty for the boy. It is such a simple thing, she wants in return. Everyone wants something, but Myrtle is easy to repay.

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Most people think loneliness is a room to one's self. It's not. Loneliness is the most suffocating in a crowded room alone.

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"Well lookie here."

"If it isn't the little Dark Lord,"

"Tiny Harrykinns himself."

"Better be careful Forge."

"Yes Gred. He might kill you with a glance."

"Very intimidating, our little Dark Lord,"

"So big a strong wind might blow him over."

Harry glances up to see the Gryffindor twins in front of him, grinning. Not mean grins or mocking ones. But happy ones. Kind ones. As if they are sharing a joke with him. He doesn't say anything. It is better not to.

"Oh look Gred, our little Dark Lord is shy."

"I do believe you are right Forge. Our shy baby Lord."

The words sound cruel, but the tone is anything but. He knows those two are the pranksters of Gryffindor. Hell, they are the pranksters of the school. Is he their next target? They don't sound like it, but you never know. Trust no one.

They place themselves on either side of him. "Might we walk you to lunch my Lord?"

"It would be such an honor."

"I'm not going to lunch," he tells them warily.
“Oh we know you haven't been eating in the Great Hall.”

“What, being surrounded by all those commoners, staring at your greatness.”

“But we have another place.”

“One that will be much more welcoming.”

“After all, we don't want our baby Lord starving before he gets a chance to take over the world.”

“That would be a tragedy.”

“The world would never be the same.”

They herd him along. His shoulders are tense. He is ready to flee at any point. They may be older and stronger than him, but he is faster. He is always faster. He has to be. They lead him to a portrait of a pear and tickle it. The pear laughs and it swings open. Inside is the kitchen. They place him at a table, right in between them.

“How mays we be helping yous?” a house elf asks.

“Lunch for three please.”

“Rights aways.”

In short order, they have their own feast set out in front of them. There is no way they are going to be able to eat all of it. He looks at the older two boys. They shrug.

“House elves like to serve,”

“No matter how few people,”

“They always go overboard.”

He watches them carefully as they eat. When he is sure the food he wants is safe, he makes himself a small plate. The twins don't say anything about his caution. In fact, they don't say anything at all. Nothing important at least. They babble on about this class and that student and some other prank they have pulled. But nothing valuable. Nothing to show what they want.

“Why are you doing this?” he finally asks. Not that he expects the truth, but it will be a start.

They share a look. “You looked like you needed it.”

“Everyone else is stupid enough to think you did it.”

“But people are stupid.”

“And bullies.”

“And we are tired of it.”

“Pranks are fun as long as you don't cross a line.”

“We don't. But everyone else seems to think that bullying you is alright.”

“Even your own House.”
“Not that they were worth much to begin with.”

“But now they are worse now.”

“We know Rule Number One,”

“They are suppose to protect you.”

“But they aren't.”

“So you need someone.”

“And besides that,”

“Parseltongue is wicked sounding.”

“Why anyone would be afraid of you,”

“Is beyond us. But if you do decide to take over the world,”

“We want to be your right hand men.”

“So it's a win either way.”

They grin at him, largely and mischievously. It was like watching a tennis match, when the two of them spoke. But he was able to follow it fine. He can see it will take some getting use to, but he can understand them without any problems.

Now the question is, does he want to give them that chance? They don't seem like they are trying to pull a prank on him. They seem honest enough. In this at least. But can he take that chance? Is he able to? What will the price be if he does? They joked about wanting to be his right hand men. Why would they want that, if they were serious?

Why would anyone want to be around him? He doesn't understand. But he gets the feeling he isn't going to have a real choice in the matter either. They don't seem like people who give up very easily.

“I don't have a choice, do I?” he asks them warily.

“Nope,”

“We've already decided,”

“You are our baby Lord.”

“We shall follow you anywhere,”

“You lead oh Captain my Captain.”

Well then. Hopefully he doesn't get too hurt when they finally reveal their hand. He lets out a small sigh. “Fine. Now which of you is which?”

They just give him identical, large grins. Great. He'll figure it out eventually. Hopefully. He sighs again. At least things will be interesting.

Just what he needs.
It is a story that has been told before – three children against the world. Will they save it? Or will it burn?

The year goes on. The attacks continue. The next is a ghost, Sir Nicholas. Then there is the first student, the same one Harry stopped the snake from attacking, Justin. Then a small Gryffindor. Another muggleborn from Ravenclaw. Finally the know-it-all Granger.

Through it all, the students steadily blame Harry. As the attacks on the student body gets worse, so do the attacks on the boy. He has ended up in the Hospital Wing a few times already because of them. He escapes as soon as he can, deeply uncomfortable with the petrified people laying there. They seem to stare at him accusingly.

And he is still hearing the voice. It seems to get louder, as there are more attacks. Stronger. It sends shivers down his spine. 'Kill. Rip. Shred. Blood. Die.' No one else ever hears it. No one gives even the slightest hint. But he does. It haunts his sleep, joining his dreams of Professor Quirrell and Voldemort.

There is still a part of his mind wondering if they are right. What if he really is doing it and he just doesn't know? He doesn't understand this dangerous power he has. Only that it is bad. The Headmaster called it protection from his Mother. He thinks it is good. But how can it be good if it kills people? It doesn't seem impossible that it can take over him and make him do things. He doesn't think he is losing time, but would he notice if he was?

Maybe not, but surely Myrtle or the twins would. Because he still spends the majority of his time with Myrtle. She is still the safest. And the twins are still determined to be around him. They have become his unofficial bodyguards. They can't protect him all the time, their schedules don't match up. They are two years older after all. But they do the best they can.

They teach him spells. They include him in the planning of their pranks, which is all the involvement he wants. They show him the secret passages of the school. They even show him this map, that shows where everyone is all of the time.

Harry doesn't know what to think. On the one hand, he likes it. The twins are great company. They joke and they grin and they don't take anything too seriously. Not even themselves. They have the great ability to get Harry to laugh. He doesn't remember the last time he laughed so much. He doesn't remember the last time he laughed at all.

On the other hand, when they call in their price, it is going to be a big one. Doing all this? Spending all this time with him? Every day the debt keeps getting larger and larger. Every time he smiles. Every time he learns something new.

What is he going to have to do to repay them?

People are complicated. You think you know a person and then they turn around and do something completely unexpected. They constantly surprise you. Who can truly understand humanity?
'Her skeleton will lay in the Chambers forever.'

Harry stares at the message in horror. Someone has been taken. A girl. She will be the first death, just like Myrtle was when the Chamber was open last time. Maybe now Myrtle will have someone else to keep her company. If she does, will she talk to him anymore? Or won't he matter again?

“It's Ginny.”

“She's missing.”

“None of the Professors can find her.”

“She's the one that's been taken.”

The twins tell him frantically as they walk towards Harry's common room. All the female students had been ordered there right away and now the male students are being ordered to return. The school is going to be shut down for sure now.

He knows the twins have a little sister. They talk about her occasionally. More than their little brother at least. They say Ginny in much more tolerable than Ron, even if she is a girl. They talk about their family quite a bit, actually. Harry knows how important it is to them. Their parents actually love and care for them. And now their little sister is missing.

Harry knows what he has to do.

This is the price. And he will pay it, if it means keeping the twins. He changes direction, walking quickly. Not running, for running will draw attention. But he hurries along the corridors as fast as he walk. With is quite fast, all things considered.

“Where are we going?” Fred asks, because he is finally able to tell the twins apart. He's rather proud of that actually. It all has to do with the placement of freckles and the pitch of their voice. George’s voice is slightly lower. Fred has more freckles under his left eye.

“To talk to someone,” he replies. They walk into the loo.

“Little Harrykinns,”

“We aren't sure if you know or not,”

“But this isn't the right loo.”

“Myrtle,” Harry calls out.

“Harry,” she smiles, “and you've brought some friends. Have you come to share my stall too?”

“Myrtle, their sister has been taken. You were alive when the Chamber was open fifty years ago. Do you remember anything?”

“You want to go after the nasty monster, don't you?”

“Someone has to. And the Professors here are going to be too late.” Not that he trusts any of them in any case.
“The monster is very fast. It can kill you before you even know it's there.”

Fast. Before you know it's there. “Myrtle, that's how you died, isn't it? The monster of the Chamber killed you.”

“Yes. Poor Moaning Myrtle. Went to the loo and never came back. A bit embarrassing, dying in the loo. No one laughed though. It was too late to laugh then.”

“Can you tell me anything useful?”

“It came out of the sink. All I saw was golden eyes, nothing else. But it came out of that sink.”

Harry goes over to the sink in question and looks at it closely. There, above the tap, is a small snake. A snake. He wonders. “Open,” he hisses. It does. He has to stare and blink for moment because he didn't think it would actually be that easy.

The entrance to Slytherin's great Chamber of Secrets is in the girls loo. Well, no wonder no one could find it. Who would look there?

“Well, well, well.”

“Would you look at that.”

“Our baby Lord found it after all.”

“Our baby Lord is so smart.”

He had almost forgotten the twins were there.

“What now oh Captain my Captain?”

“Now I stop it.”

“Don't you mean we stop it?”

He shakes his head. “It's too dangerous. You should go back for help.”

“And it isn't too dangerous for you?”

“It's our little sister down there. We should go with you.”

“Besides, who would we tell?”

Harry shrugs. “Not Professor Lockhart?”

The twins snort in agreement.

“And it's better if I go alone.” He's replaceable after all. “I have a feeling it's going to be a snake. And I can talk to snakes.” Plus he has his dangerous power. He might end up using it again and he doesn't want the twins to see it. If he can kill a man by touching him, who knows what he can do to a snake?

They look at him as if he is the stupid one. He growls in frustration. This isn't how this is suppose to work. He is the one who is suppose to face the danger. They should stay up here, where it's safe. His debt won't be paid if one of them gets hurt.
He then remembers one of the spells they taught him. Who knew it would be so useful now. They only showed it to him for a laugh. Quickly he takes out his wand and sticks them to the floor.

“Hey!”

“Baby Lord this is not part of the plan.”

“You can't go alone.”

“I have to. How else can I repay you? I'll bring your sister back.” He slips down the slimy pipe. The last thing he sees before the entrance closes is their confused and angry faces. It's for the best. They have a family. No one will miss him.

He lands with a thud. It is cool down here. He can see his breath. The floor is wet. As he goes farther along, there is old snake skin on the ground. Really big snake skin. He swallows hard. He can do this. He has to. He has to repay the twins for all they have done for him.

This is the price.

He keeps that thought in mind as he walks along, shivering and scared. He can do this. He can talk to snakes. He has his dangerous power. He can do this. He hopes.

The hall leads to an open chamber. The ceiling stretches up farther than Harry can see. More puddles of water cover the ground. And there, in the middle of the chamber, is a small girl with red hair laying on the floor. Ginny. He runs over and shakes her shoulders.

“Ginny. Ginny, can you hear me?”

“Most likely not. She's almost gone now,” a voice answers him.

He looks up in surprise. Standing in front of him is a handsome teenage boy. Probably about fifteen or sixteen. Dark hair, brown eyes, pale skin. He's... well, Harry can feel himself blush. Now is not the time. And he's never thought about anyone like that before. But this boy is... beautiful. “You have to help,” he says instead, “I have to get her back to her brothers.”

“Why?”

“I owe them a debt.”

The boy nods wisely. “Yes. You are Slytherin. We know all about owing people, don't we? No time or need for those silly needs and distractions they call friends. People are made to use and be used. What they call sentiment is really the repayment of a favor they did for us.”

Harry nods in agreement. Yes. This is it. He's never known anyone who has thought like that. Or maybe he has, but they've never said anything about it. The other Slytherins most likely understand, but they are hardly going to hold a conversation with Harry, now are they? “So will you help?”

“I'm afraid it's too late for that. Her life force is almost gone.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because,” he motions to the book laying beside Ginny, “that's draining her life force. Soon it will be all gone.”

He looks at the book. It's a diary, he realizes. Tom Marvolo Riddle is written on the front. Tom Marvolo Riddle. Tom Riddle. He thinks instantly of the name on his wrist. He has found him. He
has found his soulmate. Or his soulmate's diary at least. But something doesn't seem right. He takes a
good long look at the boy in front of him.


The teen bows. “Of course. Tom Marvolo Riddle, at your service.” The name forms in front of him
and begins to rearrange itself. 'I am Lord Voldemort' it reads.

Harry gasps. “No,” he breathes. No, this can't be happening to him. This can't be it. This can't be his
soulmate. He is the one who tried to kill him. He is the Dark Lord. No.

“Yes. I see you recognize the name. I plan on having a name that all fear. I am glad I succeeded.
Might I know your name now?”

“Harry Potter,” he answers.

“Harry Potter,” Riddle's face sneers, “you are Harry Potter? You are the one that supposedly defeated
me? You, a scrap of a thing? You look so pathetic, I bet a strong wind could knock you over.”

Harry flinches when the teen echoes the words the twins first used. He knows he's small, but why
does everyone have to point it out? Really, they would be small too if they use to live in a cupboard
and never got enough to eat.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Why? You dare question me? I would think you of all people would understand. After all, we both
have so much in common.”

“We do not,” he says, but he's really not that confident about that.

“No? We are both orphaned half bloods. Both of us have been raised by Muggles. Both of us have
the gift of parseltongue. Both Slytherins. There are even similarities in our appearances. I bet the old
fool was sweating in his shoes when you showed up.”

“The old fool?”

“Dumbledore,” Riddle sneers the name. “Everyone thinks the old wizard is so great, so good. But he
is nothing but a washed up goat.”

Harry has to stifle a giggle, for all that is wholly inappropriate. The Headmaster has always made
Harry terribly uncomfortable and the mental image Riddle just gave him is too good. Still, there is
something wrong, agreeing with Voldemort about anything. Even if he isn't Voldemort yet.

“How do you know all of this?”

“Dear Tom,” Riddle mocks, “I am so glad I have you to talk to. Dear Tom, no one understands me
like you do. Dear Tom, my brother just told me the oddest thing today. Do you know Harry Potter,
the Boy-Who-Lived, is a Parselmouth? Blah, blah, blah. It was all very boring, but I did get some
good information out of her. And I was able to use her.”

“You used Ginny to open the Chamber.”

“Very good,” he praises condescendingly, “I'm glad to see not all of my old House are idiots.”

“I won't let you win.”
Riddle sneers. “Oh how very Gryffindor of you. However, you don't have a choice, I'm afraid. *Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four. Come to me.*” he hisses.

The statue of Slytherin opens it's mouth and Harry hears an answering hiss. He was right. It is a snake after all. Now the question is, how loyal is it to Riddle? Then he sees it. It is not just a snake. Not even just a large snake. It is a basilisk. Bloody hell. He's dead.

Basilisks can kill you just by looking at you. No wonder Myrtle only remembers golden eyes before she died. That's all she would have had time to see. No matter what power he has, it can't be enough to kill a basilisk. But he has to try.

For the twins.

“*Kill him*,” Riddle orders.

Harry stands his ground, watching its reflection in the water. It is huge. This is it. But then a sound echoes through the Chamber. Music. In comes a phoenix, flying low. His breath catches. He's never seen a phoenix before. He never thought he would, outside of a book.

The bird swoops down and attacks the snake, clawing out it's eyes. He looks up and sees the bloody streaks where they use to be. His chance of survival just went up. Although he can't help but feel sad for it. It's not the basilisk's fault it is being forced to kill him, or anyone. Or maybe it wants to and just needs a target. He doesn't know. But the basilisk is a magnificent creature, deadly or not.

He runs. That's all he can think to do. The snake has to be nine meters tall and who knows how long. Just because it's blind doesn't mean it is defenseless. The basilisk follows, relying on scent and sound to guide it. The phoenix let's out a trill of music and Harry feels his courage increase. That's useful. Now if only it could have brought a weapon with it. Even a sword.

He runs and the basilisk gives chase. He is very much aware he has a time limit. He has to stop both the snake and Riddle before Ginny is dead. He has no doubt that Riddle will kill him if he isn't already dead by then.

Riddle laughs at him as he dashes from hiding spot to hiding spot. “You think you have a chance? Better just give up now. It will be better that way.”

The basilisk has him cornered. He looks around desperately for somewhere to run. But he can't. The basilisk's body is blocking him. The only place to go is up. So he climbs the wall. The basilisk hisses angrily. The phoenix trills. Riddle laughs. Harry feels an odd mixture of terror, determination and pain. There is a pressure in his head building. It almost reminds him of the headaches he got last year. But it is different this time. More direct.

The snake strikes at the same time Harry does. He thrusts out his hands, feeling the power in them. Hoping for a similar result as the one he got when he touched Professor Quirrell. A fang sinks into his arm. The wall explodes.

Harry goes flying from the blast. Rocks fall all around him in large chunks. It is a miracle they don't hit him. But they do hit something else. The basilisk. A huge piece comes down from the wall, crushing its head.

“No!” Riddle shouts, “how dare you kill my poor basilisk.”

Harry gasps, holding his arm in pain. A fang is embedded in his arm. He thought he knew pain. He thought he had a high tolerance. He thought he could handle it. He was wrong. He has never felt pain like this before. Any pain his relatives have shown him is nothing compared to this.
Riddle sees this and laughs. “And so goes the Wizarding World’s Saviour.”

Harry sneers at him through the pain. No. He is not going to win. If Harry is going to die, so is Riddle. He takes the fang out of his arm and stabs the diary with it.

“No!” This time it is a shout of pain. The diary bleeds. He stabs it again and again. Riddle fades more with every stab. When he is gone, Harry drops the fang, strength gone. He is going on will power alone and that won't last long now.

The phoenix lands beside him. He slowly stretches out a hand and pets him. It is soft. He smiles. At least when he dies, he won't be alone. He has the phoenix with him. It's a comforting thought. And he saved Ginny. He has repaid the twins. The phoenix can surely take care of the rest. He has nothing left.

But then it bows his head and cries over his wound. It hisses and sizzles and begins to heal. Harry watches in amazement as the skin knits itself together again. But it still hurts and he is still too weak and dizzy. He lays his head down, beside the bird. If this is death, he is alright with that.

The last thing he sees is the vanished image of Riddle, his name printed neatly on his wrist.

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Fate is a funny thing. Too bad no one ever feels like laughing. It's only funny if it isn't you.

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He wakes up to white. At first he thinks he really is dead. And then the smell reaches him and he realizes he is in the Hospital Wing. Again.

“Mr Potter,” Madam Pomfrey greets, “I hope this will not become a yearly habit.”

“Sorry Ma'am. I didn't mean to.”

“Humph. Well do you remember what happened?”

“Yes Ma'am. It's hard to forget fighting a basilisk.”

“I would hope so,” she answers tartly. As she runs a diagnostic over him, she mutters about meddling fools and crazy schemes and blatant disregard for safety. A trill sound, seemingly agreeing with her. He turns and sees the phoenix, sitting on the headrest of the bed.

“Fawkes hasn't left your side since you've been here.”

“Fawkes?”

“The Headmaster's phoenix. Even Albus can't get him to move. He seems to be quite attached to you.”

“He saved my life.”

“Well everything seems to be in order. You have been unconscious for a week now. I recommend being careful with that arm. It's healed, but it's likely to be tender for a few more days yet. There
doesn’t appear to be any lingering affects.”

“Does this mean I can leave?”

“Oh no young man. You have just woken up from battling a basilisk. You are staying right here. But this does mean you are fit for company. I can tell you I have two students who are very anxious to see you. Keep sneaking in, of all the nerve.”

As if her complaints summoned them, “Harrykins!”

“Our baby Dark Lord is awake!”

The twins arrive. They sit down, right on the bed.

“Do not wind him up,” Madam Pomfrey warns as she leaves, “or you will find yourselves banned from here. Do you understand young men?”

“Of course dear Lady,”

“Nothing could be clearer.”

“See that it is,” she says sternly, but Harry swears he sees a small smile as she turns and walks away.

“You know baby Lord,”

“If you didn't want to take exams,”

“There are better ways to get out of them,”

“Then battling a basilisk.”

“No matter how bad arse it makes you sound.”

“Don't worry, I never want to do that again. How is your sister?”

They turn serious. “She'll be fine,”

“But she's in St Mungo's right now.”

“The Healers want to be sure she is fine.”

“Madam Pomfrey wanted to take you there as well,”

“But the Headmaster insisted you stay at the school,”

“So the Healers checked on you over here.”

“Madam Pomfrey was furious,”

“But they couldn't find anything wrong with you,”

“Besides the healed basilisk bite.”

“I'm glad she's going to be fine,” he tells them. It would all be for nothing if she wasn't. He's happy he wasn't too late.

“You will never do that again,” George says and he has never seen them so serious.
“What?”

“Risk your life like that.”

“Someone had to do it. And there wasn't time to fetch a Professor.”

“And it had nothing to do with 'repaying us’?”

“Well, yes, but it's fine.”

“It's not fine. You almost died!”

Harry flinches at the harsh shout.

“You were bitten by a basilisk. If Fawkes hadn't healed you, you would be dead.”

“But I saved your sister,” he says, confused.

“This isn't about debts and keeping score. This is about friendship and the fact that you almost got yourself killed to repay something that doesn't exist.”

“Yes it does.”

“No, it doesn't. We talked to the ultimate Slytherin about this,”

“Professor Black and he said that Slytherins think in terms of deals and favors most of the time,”

“If they aren't dealing with someone they consider a close friend.”

“And that's why you would feel that you would owe us.”

“But we don't think like that.”

“You were our friend,”

“The moment we started talking to you,”

“We didn't expect anything in return.”

“Everything has a price. Everyone wants something,” he tells them gravely.

“Even us?”

Harry nods, not looking at them. He has an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach. He doesn't want to see the look on their faces. It can't be good. After all, who would want to be friends with someone like him?

“In that case,”

“We owe you now.”

“What?”

“You risked your life.”

“You almost died.”
“Repaying us would have been finding the Chamber and opening it,”

“Going after Ginny was extra,”

“So we owe you now.”

Harry shakes his head. “No you don't.”

“And why not?”

“Because I was paying my debt.”

“You did more than could ever be expected.”

“So try again.”

Harry is silent for a long time before he finally whispers, “Because I'm not worth it.”

The next thing he knows, he has two pairs of arms wrapped tightly around him. “Yes you are little brother.”

“And if we have to spend the rest of our lives proving that, so be it.”

“You are one of us now,”

“No matter what anyone else says.”

Harry can't help but lean into the touch. No one has ever hugged him like this before. It feels nice. He never wants it to end. Fawkes trills in agreement. They stay like that for a long time.

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Once the bond of brotherhood is forged, it is nigh impossible to break. No matter how suspicious or distrustful you are.

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It is only when Harry is alone that he remembers. Harry Potter. Tom Riddle.

His name was on Riddle's wrist. On Voldemort's wrist. He is Voldemort's soulmate. Or he could be. Soulmate or enemy. Loved or hated. That's how it goes. There is never anyway to tell. He remembers last year, how frantically he searched for a Tom Riddle. Well now he has found him. He gently traces the name on his wrist.

Tom Riddle.

How can he know? For anyone else, surely it would mean that Tom Riddle is his enemy. He has tried to kill him three times now. But what if he is his soulmate? What if, because of this strange and dangerous power he has, he is Voldemort's match? He has killed two people now, a basilisk and a memory of a person. He made the wall explode with his bare hands. He hadn't even thought about it. It had just happened when his hands tingled.
What can that mean? He has heard of accidental magic, but that can't be what that was. That was much too big for accidental magic. The most he has ever done before was end up on his old school's roof when running from Dudley and his gang. Everything else was small.

But now he made a wall of solid rock explode. What can that mean?

And even if Riddle isn't his soulmate, that doesn't mean it gets any better. Draco hates him. He lives to make his life miserable. He is fully convinced that Harry is his enemy. His rival. He hates Harry.

Draco Malfoy

Tom Riddle

Does it matter? Both hate him. He is alone in this world. Unwanted. For who can really care for him, if his soulmate hates him?

Unlovable.

Everyone talks about how great soulmates are. They describe the joy and happiness of having one. They talk about Fate and perfect matches. Everyone talks about the good things. No one talks about the problems.

When he is released from the Hospital Wing the next day, he is summoned by the Headmaster to his office. He fidgets nervously before knocking.

“Come in,” he call, “Ah Harry my boy, how are you?”

“Fine Sir.”

“Good, I am glad you have recovered from your little adventure.”

Little adventure? Is that what the Headmaster calls it? Some game he played and got a few scraps in return. Everyone keeps telling him that he almost died and here the old wizard is acting as if it was all a game. A meaningless, little game. “Yes Sir.”

“Good. Now this is suppose to be a secret, so naturally the entire school knows about it. Now I am sure you are wondering why I called you here. Rest assured, you are not in trouble. Indeed, I found myself wondering if you might want this? A small souvenir from your little adventure.” The man's eyes are twinkling.

In his hand, he is holding out the basilisk fang Harry had been stabbed with. “It is perfectly safe to handle. The venom is all gone from it.”

The venom is gone. Because it had been in Harry's body instead. Slowly, carefully, he reaches out and takes the fang. Not because he wants to, but because it is expected of him. The Headmaster clearly wants him to have it. That was no question, but an order. “Thank you Sir.”

“You are most welcome, my dear boy. Now,”
He is interrupted by a tall blonde man entering the room. It doesn't take much to figure out who he is. He looks just like an older version of Draco.

“Headmaster,” he greets coldly, “you have reason to ask for me?”

“Ah yes Lucius, I did have some business. You see,”

Harry doesn't listen to what is being said. For there, trailing behind Mr Malfoy is Dobby. Harry doesn't say anything, but his eyes widen. Oh. This has to be Dobby's master. And that means that Mr Malfoy is the one responsible for opening the Chamber to begin with. Dobby looks from Mr Malfoy to the Headmaster's desk. He turns and looks and sees the final confirmation.

The diary sits on the Headmaster's desk. He nods and understanding as he listens to the two men threaten each other without uttering a single threat. So this is how the game is played. As Mr Malfoy turns to leave, he knows what he has to do. He is going to help his friend.

He grabs the diary and runs after the man. “Mr Malfoy,” he calls.

The man turns and sneers down at him. It must be a Slytherin ability, to sneer like that. He wonders how long it will take him to be able to do that. “What boy?”

“You forgot your diary,” he hands it to him.

“This is not mine, you stupid boy. Whatever gave you that idea? Has the Headmaster been filling your head with stupid stories.”

“ No Sir. But this is yours,” he insists.

Mr Malfoy rolls his eyes. “Fine, I do not have time for such games. It's not mine, but if you insist, I will take it. Here,” he grabs the diary out of Harry's hands and thrusts it into Dobby's. He turns and walks away. Harry motions for Dobby to open the diary.

“Oh Master has given Dobby clothes,” the elf exclaims excitedly.

“What are you raving about now?”

Dobby holds up the sock. “Master has given Dobby clothes. Dobby is free house elf.”

“I didn't give you any clothes you demented creature.”

Harry smirks and lifts up his trouser leg, showing his missing sock.

“You,” Mr Malfoy growls, furious, “you little brat. I'll teach you a lesson,” he stalks towards him. “You think you can mess with me and get away with it. I'll show you, you little-” He is cut off when Dobby flings him back with a blast of magic.

He tumbles head over arse and Harry can't help but laugh. He will remember the look on Mr Malfoy's face for the rest of his life. The wizard snarls at him, but flees, looking none too dignified.

Dobby looks very pleased with himself. “No one hurt Mr Harry Potter sir. Mr Harry Potter sir is Dobby's friend.”

“Thanks Dobby.”

“Oh Mr Harry Potter sir is thanking Dobby. Mr Harry Potter sir is great wizard! Great!”
Harry laughs.
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Always make friends with the ones who no one else wants. They are the ones who will stick by you the most. And you never know when they can be of use.
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That is the last time he laughed. Once again he is sent home to his relative's 'loving care'.
The list of chores gets longer.
The nightmares get worse.
His Uncle gets angrier with each time he is woken up.
The scar between his thumb and forefinger gets deeper.
The regret that he survived the basilisk grows each time it happens.
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Oh the toils of life. The older you get, the harder they get in return.
In which Dementors are present, depression is a problem and Harry is not surprised.

The train ride is different this year. Instead of sitting with the first years, he sits with the twins. They had stuck themselves to his side as soon as they saw him. The rest of their family was more wary. Thankful that he saved Ginny, but cautious because of all of the rumors about him. Ron insists it was his fault to begin with.

How? He is a Slytherin. Simple as that.

Once they are in their compartment, the tension in Harry's shoulders decreases a little. Not all, because that would mean he thought he was completely safe. And he's not. Even if he trusted the twins completely, he still wouldn't. He is only safe when he is alone, protected by Myrtle.

“So baby Lord,”

“How was your summer?”

Harry gets out his homework and begins to read. “Same as usual. Yours?”

“Tense.”

“Our parents fussed over Ginny the entire time.”

“Ginny was too quiet.”

“Bill invited us to Egypt. He works as a curse breaker.”

“Had our picture in the paper and everything.”

“It was wicked. We were almost able to leave little Ronikinns,”

“In one of the tombs,”

“But Mum found out and had a fit.”

“Little bugger deserved it.”

“Went on the entire time about you and how you are the cause of all evil.”

They roll their eyes in exasperation. Both of them have told Harry multiple times how annoying their little brother could be. They liked Ginny much better. Said she had a sense of humor. He takes their word for it because he has never had a conversation with her, even after he rescued her from the Chamber.

“Sirius Black escaped Azkaban.”

“Who? And what?”
They share a look.

“Azkaban is where the most dangerous wizards go.”

“It suppose to be the most secure prison in the Wizarding World.”

“Or Wizarding UK, for those of us,”

“Who don't have an ego the size of,”

“The Hogwarts Express.”

Harry snorts. “Not very secure if he escaped.”

“No one knows how he did it.”

“But they think he is heading towards Hogwarts.”

“Why?”

They share another look. “Sirius Black is your godfather,” Fred says bluntly.

“He's in Azkaban for killing twelve Muggles and Peter Pettigrew, one of his best mates,”

“And betraying your parents, his other best mates, to You-Know-Who.”

“They think he is after you now.”

Harry looks at them in a sort of resigned shock. He is starting to see a pattern to his school years and he can't say he's surprised. He doesn't like it, but he's not really all that shocked. He would be more surprised if Black wasn't after him.

“Black... Is he related to Professor Black?”

“It's his older brother.”

Well this is going to be a fun school year. He goes back to his homework, with the occasional help from the twins. Not that he really needs it, it's all fairly simple, but it does make things easier. And quicker. He has just finished his Charms essay when the train stops unexpectedly.

“Wha-” all three of they give a violent shake as a chill creeps into their bones.

Slowly, their door is open by a figure in a black cloak. Harry shivers violently. Despair floods his system, leaving him breathless. The sheer hopelessness of his life overwhelms him. He hears a woman screaming, high and scared.

That is the last thing he hears before darkness takes him.

He wakes up to find the twins and a strange scruffy man staring down at him. He jerks away quickly, banging his head against the bench. He does not like strangers looking at him when he is helpless. Especially strange men.

“Easy now,” the man says, and reaches for him.

He backs up farther, into the corner.

George places himself between Harry and the man. “It's alright Harrykinns,”
“He stopped the Dementor from taking a seat with us,”

“He’s the new DADA Professor.”

If they wanted to reassure him, they didn’t. He has less reason to trust the DADA Professor than he has to trust Voldemort. Sometimes they are one in the same. Of course, they know that, so they are warning him at the same time as well as putting the Professor at ease.

The Professor had stopped when he backed up. Now he is looking at him strangely. Not Professor Quirrell strange or Professor Lockhart strange, but still, strange. He reaches into his case and pulls out a bar of chocolate. “Here, this helps with the effects of a Dementor.”

“Dementors?” Harry asks, wanting to know just what in the world attacked him, but not feeling up to complete sentences. The name sounds familiar. Something about souls maybe?

“They guard Azkaban,” the Professor tells him, “They are Dark creatures that suck the hope and happiness out of people.”

Creatures that suck the hope and happiness out of people. Great. This is a wonderful beginning to the new school year. Just what he needs. Something to make him more miserable than he already is.

“What are they doing here Professor?” George asks, still standing in front of Harry. He takes he offered chocolate from the man and eats some, before handing it to Harry. The gesture makes a warm feeling in his stomach appear.

“The Ministry, in all it's wisdom, have ordered the Dementors to guard Hogwarts against Black.”

“ What? They want Dementors at the school ?!”

The Professor sighs. “I'm afraid so. They are confined to the perimeter of the grounds, but they will be present.”

They twins look at each other and Harry agrees. This year is going to be yet another level of hell. What a surprise.

The Professor goes to check on the other students and Harry gets back to work, still cold. Fred and George seat themselves on either side of him. He is grateful for the warmth and protection. He doesn't even stop to think about his caution when it comes to them and what they want. He is too tired for that. The Dementors affected him more than he originally thought.

He has to find a way to protect himself. He cannot let a weakness like this be known. It will be exploited ruthlessly. Especially since they are on the grounds. He cannot be seen passing out whenever they get too close. It will ruin him more than he already is. His House considers him the weakest link as is. No need to encourage them.

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The world is a dangerous place. Beware.

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The year is a strange one. And a bad one. It turns out that he can feel the Dementors, even in the
castle. It doesn't matter where he is, he is always chilled to the bone. It's hard to care about anything anymore. Harder. This world never gave him much to care about to begin with.

His Divination Professor keeps predicting his death in horrible and painful ways. Every class, it seems as if she has a new method of killing him. He thinks his Housemates are taking notes. This is not helped by the thought that he keeps seeing a Grimm anywhere he goes.

For another, he can't take part in Hogsmeade weekends. Which seems like such a simple thing, but a disappointment nonetheless. Not only does he not have a permission slip signed, he doubts he would be allowed to go even if he did. For he is not allowed out of anyone's sight.

Suddenly there is an intense interest in knowing where he is. Every second of everyday must be accounted for. It is maddening. It would be even more so if he didn't know what was going on. Because no one is telling him anything. Not that adults anyways. His Housemates have made it very clear they think the whole thing is a joke. There is even the threat of giving him to Black, gift wrapped.

He is forced to spend less time with Myrtle and more time in the common room. Which means spending more time, huddling in a dark corner, trying to be invisible. It doesn't help the depression he is dealing with.

The twins, whenever he isn't confined to his prison, will not leave his side. They have appointed themselves his unofficial bodyguards and are taking their job very seriously. He has never seen those two serious about anything, but his safety. It makes him feel odd.

And claustrophobic. He is use to being on his own. To no one caring what he did or where he went. Now everyone cares, but most for the wrong reason. It makes his skin itch. It makes him want to scream. It makes him want to cry 'hypocrite' to the entire world.

Of course his two bodyguards eventually pick up on this. He doesn't understand why no one seems to think Fred and George are stupid. Yes, they are pranksters. Sure, they don't take anything, let alone school, seriously. But they aren't stupid. And they aren't dense. So they give Harry a way to be alone, but safe.

The Marauders Map.

It is a special map they found their first year that shows the location of every person in the school at any given time. It is completely accurate and completely foolproof. There's no way to trick it or hide from it. So if Sirius Black gets anywhere near Harry, he'll know.

It also shows hidden passages and corridors. The kitchen is there, various shortcuts and secret hallways. The twins accomplishments makes much more sense now. It is a major key to their success. And they are giving it to him.

His first thought is what it will cost him. But they must be expecting that, after last year, and firmly tell him not to be a git. For the next hour. The second thought is to keep his doubts to himself. His ears are still ringing from their affronted lecture about friendship and Gryffindors and trust. They give examples in fine detail, saying he obviously needs them. The next thought makes him smile, a very small and secret one. Maybe he has two friends after all.

They even offer to sneak him into Hogsmeade with them, security be damned, if it will make him smile. He tells them not to bother. The chances of being caught are too high. Besides, he would have to spend the entire time under the invisibility cloak and what fun would that be?
So they bring him back chocolate instead. Lots and lots of chocolate. He needs it.

Not only are the Dementors affecting his days, they are affecting his nights. He has always had a problem with nightmares, ever since he was little. They got worse when he came to Hogwarts. Now, they have increased to the next level. He has never been more thankful for silencing charms in his life. His nightmares are violent and nightly. Each time he closes his eyes, he sees another close death experience. Hears the woman scream. Sees a sicking green light. Lives another day at his relative's house. The last makes his back and ankle ache.

Aunt Marge had visited that summer. He hates Aunt Marge. Not only is she forever saying how useless he is, how worthless his parents were, how what he needs is a good canning, she also has a dog. A vicious one. It likes to chase Harry around and use him as a chew toy. This summer it had gotten a hold of his ankle before he was able to get away.

This isn't the first time Ripper has bit him, but it is the worse. His ankle is a series of jagged lines and pink scars. The only thing his relatives did, besides laugh, was give him a worn flannel to wrap it. So he wouldn't get blood on the floor. He had spent most of that visit with a fever because it had gotten infected.

Not enough to take him to the A&E, but enough to make his life harder than it needed to be. Dudley also developed a new game called Harry Tripping. His cousin's games had a pattern. They were never very cleverly named and they usually caused Harry pain.

It still aches when it rains.

So, needless to say, he isn't getting much sleep. The chocolate helps, somewhat, during the day, so he is eating quite a bit. Enough to make him sick of it. But he is so cold and no amount of layers or warming spells seem to help. So he eats his chocolate.

Creatures that suck the happiness and joy out of a person are dangerous to begin with. But, for a person without much joy or happiness, they can be deadly. What do you do when there's nothing left to steal?

The DADA Professor, Lupin, makes Harry uneasy still. There is something about him. Something that makes his stomach twist. Well, two things really. One is much less important than the other, in his mind. Which is ironic because really, it should be the other way around.

There is something dangerous about Professor Lupin. Something wild. It surrounds the man like a cloak. A menacing presence in the back of his eyes. He hides it well, but Harry is use to looking for threats in those around him. The mild manner man is not mild mannered at all. Not all of him. There is a flash of gold in his eyes that watches the world through the Professor's eyes.

But for all that is feels threatening, it doesn't feel threatening towards Harry. Never once does it look at him like prey. It keeps track of him, watches him, but it feels more... protective than anything else. Like it is looking out for his safety.

No, the danger is not want scares him. It is the Professor himself. He also has a way of watching
Harry. But unlike the lurking presence, it does not make him feel safe. It makes him feel hunted.
Analyzed. He has a way of looking at Harry as if he can't believe what he is seeing. And it isn't
because he is the Boy-Who-Lived. He never even glances at his scar.

He plans on staying far away from his new DADA Professor. Just because his stare isn't like
Professor Lockhart's stare, doesn't mean it is anything good. He managed to avoid one Professor. He
can avoid another.

At least this Professor actually knows what he is talking about. They are actually learning about
Defense Against the Dark Arts in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. It is a novel
experience. It would be like Professor Binns actually teaching History of Magic and not just droning
on about the Goblin Wars.

Still, that doesn't make the man anymore trustworthy. Maybe the danger in his eyes is safe, but the
rest of the Professor is to be avoided.

So he does.

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Sometimes the most dangerous things in life are the safest.

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Trying to learn the Patronus charm is hard, Harry soon finds out. Harder than he thought it would be.
The fact that is a Seventh year spell doesn't faze him. He can handle most spells Fred and George
teach him and they are OWL spells. If he can learn Fifth years spells, surely he can learn one
Seventh year spell.

He can't even ask a Professor for help. The logical choice would be Professor Lupin, but he doesn't
trust that man at all. He refuses to be alone with him. None of the other Professors have ever shown
him a reason to think they would help him. And Professor Black refuses to talk to him. Not that he
knows if any of them know how to cast a Patronus charm in any case.

The twins try and help him, but they are learning it at the same time. They are slightly more
successful than he is, but none of them have any solid results yet.

No, the problem is not power. The problem is memories. You have to have good memories to cast a
Patronus charm. You have to have good, powerful happy memories. Memories that will help you
throw off the despair the Dementors bring. That is the key to the spell. To battle powerful depression,
you have to have powerful happiness.

What has life given Harry to be happy about?

He has no loving family to think of. The only time he has seen his parents is in the Mirror of Erised.
The only memory he has of his Mother is her dying and wasn't that a shock when he realized that.
He can't even bring himself to fully trust the friends he does have. He has no soulmate to hope for.
He is a Freak, even in the Wizarding World.

What does he have to live for? He can't even dream. They have all turned to nightmares.
You have to pretend you get an endgame. You have to carry on like you will; otherwise, you can't carry on at all.

Everything comes to a head, as is the pattern, one day not long before the end of the year. It starts with the absence of Fred. Now, you do see the twins alone sometimes. Very rarely, but it does happen. Mostly when the two of them are causing mischief at separate ends of the castle.

What you do not usually see is a lone twin running frantically to find Harry because his twin is missing.

“What happen?” Harry asks as soon as he sees George. He knows instantly that something is wrong.

“Fred’s gone. He was suppose to meet me in the common room half an hour ago. I thought he ran into some trouble, but I can't find him anywhere.”

It is odd hearing George talk by himself, without any additional comment from Fred. It's not right. Harry pulls out the map. “I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” he tells it. They both search the map before Harry points, “There!” The Shrieking Shack. And he isn't alone either. Sirius Black.

The two boys dash off. Harry swallows nervously. They are about to meet Sirius Black. The mass murderer. The reason his parents are dead. It isn't a very encouraging scenario. But he is determined to rescue Fred. No one hurts his friends and gets away with it. And he is slightly more convinced they are his friends. More than he was last year at least. They are very persistent.

They arrive at the Shack and slowly creep inside. The place is filled with old, dusty furniture scattered around the floor. The covers any available surface. It is easy to see how the place received its haunted reputation. It’s creepy.

Looking around, Black is in the corner of the room, wand in hand. Fred is on the bed, tied up, but unharmed otherwise.

“Where's the rat?” Black is asking.

“Once again, what rat are you talking about? I don't own a rat.”

“Don't play dumb with me. Your pet rat. Where is the little beast?”

Fred starts laughing at the crazed man.

Black snarls. “Think you're clever do you? Just wait until I get my hands on it.”

“You know,” Fred says casually, “I've been mistaken for my twin many times. Daily in fact. We make a game out of it. Even our own Mother can't tell us apart. There's only one person who can and he's a scrawny little boy everyone underestimates.”

Harry looks at George, unimpressed. Really?

George shrugs in a 'Well, it's true' kind of way.
Harry rolls his eyes.

“But,” Fred continues, “I have never been mistaken for my little brother before. It's quite refreshing actually.”

“Your little brother,” Black repeats.

“Yup. Little Ronikinns got Percy's old rat, not us. Never wanted him.”

“Your little brother,” Black repeats, seemingly stunned.

And that's when George acts, “Stupefy,” he shouts, casting an actual stunner at the man.

“Protego,” Black casts the shielding charm with Fred's wand.

George shoots a stinging spell at him, and then a tripping jinx. Black dodges the first one, but the second spell hits it's mark. But not before he hits George with a jelly-leg jinx. As the two battle, Harry sneaks into the room without being seen. Well, Fred sees him, but Fred just winks. He hides behind a broken table and waits for his chance.

He gets it when George managed to maneuver Black so his back was directly in front of him. “Stupefy,” he casts and Black drops like a rock.

The three grin at each other before George goes to Fred's side. One 'finite incarnate' and Fred is untied. “Well Forge, that was easier than expected.”

“And what an experience too. Just wait till little Ronikinns hears he looks enough like his handsome older brothers to be mistaken as one of us;”

“He should be honored. We are dashing good looking.”

“Quite right. We had to inherit something from the gene pool.”

“Besides mischief?” a voice from behind them asks.

They turn and see Professors Black, Snape and Lupin standing there. None of them looks very happy.

“Professors, what timing,”

“We seem to have caught the wizard,”

“That all the well trained and certified others,”

“At our glorious Ministry, have failed to catch.”

“It wasn't even that hard.”

Professor Black quirks an eyebrow at them, something he surely picked up from his partner. Said partner is glaring at them. Professor Lupin, on the other hand, can't seem to take his eyes off of a Stunned Black. Harry gets the feeling there is more going on here than he knows.

“ And just what do you little dunderheads think you are doing, taking on this man,” Professor Snape sneers the last word, “Do you honestly believe you are skilled enough to take on a mass murderer without being killed?”
“We managed fine,” George answers with a shrug.

“Not that it was planned. Black grabbed me on my way to meet Gred.”

“And when Forge failed to show up, we went after him.”

“Did it not occur to you to fetch a Professor first?” Professor Snape purrs dangerously.

“With your track record?”

“No.”

“My track-”

“What did he want?” Professor Lupin interrupts.

Professor Snape glares at him, but he pays no heed.

“He thought I was Ron. Wanted our pet rat.”

“Pet rat... no, it can't be,” Professor Lupin pales. “This rat, how long have you had it?”

“I fail to see-” Professor Snape starts, but Professor Lupin cuts him off again.

“Oh shut up. How long?”

“A while now,”

“He was Percy's before he was Ron's. He was the one who found him, so,”

“Eleven, twelve years?”

Professor Lupin pales farther. “And is he missing a toe on one of his paws?”

“Really Lupin, surely you aren't suggesting what I think you are?” Professor Black asks, “I know what my brother means to you, but it's this a bit far reaching?”

“He is. How did you know? Have you seen him?”

“We were unregistered animagus in school,” Professor Lupin admits. “Peter was a rat.” All three Professors look at each other. Then Professor Lupin casts “Rennervate,” before anyone can stop him. Black groans as Professor Lupin walks over to him.

“Remmy?” he asks groggily, “is that you?”

“Remmy?” George and Fred snicker quietly. Harry is too focused on the pair to laugh right now.

“Is Peter alive?” Professor Lupin asks urgently, “Sirius, is Peter still alive?”

“That rat,” Black growls, “a fitting form. Yes, he's at Hogwarts. I saw him in the paper. He's been playing pet for those ones brother apparently.”

“Oh Siri,” Professor Lupin sighs as he kisses Black's forehead.

“And what proof do you have?” Professor Snape snarls, looking furious.

“I've known him for years. I was there when he transformed for the first time. I know what that little
back stabber looks like.”

“How convenient. And I suppose you want us to believe you did not betray the Potters either.”

“We switched secret keepers. Thought it would be safer because I was the obvious choice. Who would think that timid little Peter would be the one?”

“Yes, very convenient,” Professor Snape tells him.

“It's true. I don't need you to believe me Snivellus,” Black spits the name.

“What have I told you about calling him that?” Professor Black snaps back.

“Oh, so sorry little brother. I hate to offend your precious little partner. Oh wait,”

“Shut your mouth Sirius Orion Black.”

“Oh, now I'm scared. Imitating Mummy now are we? Well you always were the perfect little son. Tell me, still sporting that charming tattoo?”

“At least I'm not a traitor.”

“I'm a traitor? Take a look in the mirror brother mine. I'm not the one who followed the family tradition. Ever since you met Snivellus over there, you have been on the wrong path.”

“Because your soulmate is so saintly, Mutt.”

“Now Severus,” Professor Lupin says.

“Don't you dare use that tone with me Lupin. It is not your place nor your right. I have given you no leave to use my name.”

“Yes, Remmy, don't want to upset His Royal Snivellus. He might behead you. Or, more likely, poison you. The slimy snake is a Potion Master after all.”

“How good of you to remember Mutt.”

“He always did fight the cowards way. A stab in the back is exactly his style.”

“And a fight with unfair odds, four against one, was always yours.”

“Slimy little worthless Freak! You always were a Dark bastard, even from the start.”

“And I suppose you are the symbol of all things Light, being a Black.”

“At least people wanted me. Poor unwanted Snivellus, having to beg for what he needs. Burden to those around you. No one loves you. No one cares about you. All you have are the scraps everyone has thrown away. Did Mummy and Daddy not love you?”

Harry covers his ears with his hands. He starts to shake. His breathing picks up, coming in and out much too fast. He feels dizzy. He knows what is happening, but doesn't know exactly why. This isn't his first panic attack after all. But why is he having one now? But as the fight continues, the words blur in his ears, replaced by white noise. And then, suddenly, it is not his Professors fighting, it is his Uncle.

His Uncle is yelling at him, telling him want an unwanted burden he is. How no one could ever want
or love him. He is a worthless waste of space. A useless boy. A Freak. He falls to the floor, curling himself into a ball, making himself a smaller target. The next thing he knows are gentle voices.

“Hey baby Lord,”

“It's alright,”

“It's fine,”

“You're safe,”

“We have you,”

“We have you,”

“It's alright now,”

“The stupid men have stopped yelling,”

“Just breathe now,”

“In and out,”

“In and out,”

“In and out, that's it,”

“Good job,”

“Keep it up baby Lord,”

“You can do it,”

“Just listen to us,”

“You're doing great,”

“In and out,”

“In and out,”

Harry uncurls enough to see the twins looking down at him in concern. He offers them an unsteady smile in return. They grin at him.

“Our little Harrykins is back,”

“With us. We knew you could do it,”

“Good job, baby Lord.”

“Baby Lord?” Black asks.

Harry looks up to see the adults encased in purple bubbles. Professors Black and Snape are in one and Professor Lupin and Black are in another. Both bubbles are as far away from each other as they can get. Harry isn't sure how they got like that.

“In his second year, the school found out he was a parselmouth,”
“And decided he was the next Dark Lord,"

“Obviously as his right hand men, it is our duty to defend him,” the last is more of a warning than anything else.

Black stares at him and Harry shrinks back from the gaze. It is far too heavy for him to bear.

“Wait, Harry, is that you?”

Professor Snape snorts. “And so the Mutt finally recognizes his godson. It took you long enough.”

“But, but, you're a Slytherin. Both of your parents were in Gryffindor.”

Harry shrinks back even farther, away from him. He shouldn't be surprised. What does it matter? Just another person who is disappointed in him. They always are.

“Since the child is always in the same House as their parents,” Professor Black says, looking pointedly at his brother.

“Yeah, but I didn't want to be Dark.”

“Oh for Merlin's sake Sirius!” he yells, clearly done, “How many times have I told you that Slytherin does not mean Dark and that Dark does not mean evil?! I don't know why I bother because you have such a thick skull, it'll never get through. And let's not even start on family pressure and expectations and giving into them because you will be killed otherwise. Oh no, let's not consider that at all. Let's rush headlong into danger instead, leaving everyone else to fend for themselves.

“Because you are a brave, strong and courageous Gryffindor. You can do no wrong. Always on the side of the right and just. Never thinking things through. Never mind that the mindless prejudice pushes Slytherins away from you. Never mind that the only place they feel welcome and safe is the Dark because the Light already hates them. Never mind that you cause a rift at such a young age that no one can cross it without drowning in the gulf below. That the Light has actively caused people to go Dark because that is the only place they are accepted.

“No, obviously not because Gryffindor means Good and Slytherin means Evil. Clearly they should just go ahead and kill all the Slytherins as soon as they are sorted. They are going to go bad anyways. What is the loss?! Professor Black is breathing heavy by the end of his rant. Professor Snape lays a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“But why should you care?” he repeats, “you never have before.”

Black just stares at his brother as if he has never seen him before. “Reggy...”

“Don't call me that,” Professor Black says harshly, “you lost that right a long time ago. Only my big brother can call me that and he has been dead for years. He was dead before he graduated Hogwarts.”

There is an awkward silence. Harry fights the need to squirm. Don't talk. Don't move. Don't remind them of your presence. Pretend you do not exist.

“Well as fascinating as this is,”

“We found Pettigrew,” the twins say.

The adults turn and look at them. They wave the map around triumphantly.
“Is that the Marauders Map?” Black asks excitedly, “you found it?”

“Maybe,”

“What's it to you?”

Black grins, “I never did introduce myself. I am Padfoot and this,” gesturing to Professor Lupin, “is Moony.”

Fred and George look at each other excitedly, eyes large. Harry knows how much the two of them have looked up to the makers of the Map. And now here they are, right in front of them. In any other case, he thinks they would be on the ground, bowing to them. But they hold back, because of him. It is an appropriate analogy, he thinks, because he is always holding them back. He is the burden they insist on carrying.

“And what, exactly, does that piece of parchment prove?” Professor Snape asks dryly.

“It is a Map of the school and the grounds. It shows everyone on it and their location at any given point. We made it while we were students,” Professor Lupin answers, stopping Black from speaking with a gesture. Black pouts.

“And so many more things make sense now,” Professor Snape mutters, “Where is the rat?”

“In Gryffindor Tower, with Ron.” The two look slightly sick at the thought.

Black nods. “That's where he was before when I tried to get him.”

“Well come along now. Let's get this over with. Mr Potter, you may end the spell now.”

Harry looks surprised. He did this? How?

“Our powerful baby Lord,”

“Doing magic all by himself now.”

“We're so proud.” George wipes away a fake tear.

“Concentrate and say 'finite incarnate’,” Professor Black answers, showing Harry the movement with his wand. He points his wand at Professors Black and Snape's bubble first and then the other, successful each time.

Professor Black nods approvingly. As if that was a hard spell.

Professor Snape leaves with a billow of his robes, the rest follow. But then he freezes when they reach outside. “Lupin,” he snaps urgently, “did you take your potion?”

He pales, “Not today,” he admits before looking at the others, “Run.”

Professors Black and Snape obey, grabbing all three students before running. Professor Snape is the one who grabs Harry, which he finds strange. He never thought the Professor would want to touch him. Something really bad must be happening if he is. He keeps up with the man's long strides easily, but the twins aren't so lucky. Professor Black is dragging them more than anything. He wants to ask what is happening, but doesn't think they'll answer. They are too busy.

But then a long, lone howl fills the air and answers his question. Werewolf. The two Professors curse and run faster. But it is no use. Professor Lupin, the wolf, is on them in moments. The three are
pushed roughly behind the Professors as they raise their wands. Harry has the horrible feeling that if something doesn't happen soon, they are all going to die.

He peeks out from behind and meets a familiar stare. That's it. He darts out from behind his two Professors, evading the attempts from all four of them to grab him.

"Potter, get back here," Professor Snape orders and he hears the fear in his Professor's voice. It's odd. He didn't think his Professor was afraid of anything. Not because he is an adult. He is aware that adults can be afraid, just like children can. But sometimes Professor Snape doesn't seem human. It's as if nothing can touch him. He is the rock in the middle of the storm. Unmoved. But here and now, facing a werewolf, with his partner beside him and three students behind him, he is afraid.

But Harry isn't.

He now knows what the danger is behind Professor Lupin's eyes. This is the thing that watches him. This is the creature that has never felt like a threat to him, despite the obvious threat it poses. A werewolf who considers him one of his own. He has to. There is no other way to describe the look the wolf gives him. Pack.

So he is not afraid. "It's alright," he tells the wolf, "it's fine. I'm safe. They'll protect me."

"What in blazes name are you talking about Potter," Professor Snape snaps.

"It's alright," he reassures, "Professor Snape is just a bit grumpy. He doesn't mean any harm." Harry hopes he's right. He has to be right. The Professor might hate him and like to make his life miserable, but he doesn't mean any harm. Not permanent, physical harm. He is a snake. His Professor will protect him, even if he doesn't like him. Isn't this situation proof of that? He's even protecting Gryffindors right now. You don't get much more dedicated than that.

Not that he trusts the man, just his principles.

The wolf growls angrily.

"It's alright," he reassures, "Professor Snape is just a bit grumpy. He doesn't mean any harm." Harry hopes he's right. He has to be right. The Professor might hate him and like to make his life miserable, but he doesn't mean any harm. Not permanent, physical harm. He is a snake. His Professor will protect him, even if he doesn't like him. Isn't this situation proof of that? He's even protecting Gryffindors right now. You don't get much more dedicated than that.

The wolf whines and gets down on all four legs. It crouches like it is going to pounce. Harry feels his heartbeat pick up. He might trust the wolf not to harm him, but he has no good experiences involving dogs. He's secretly afraid of them, after dealing with Ripper for so long. But the wolf wags his tail instead, like a puppy who wants to play.

He takes a step forward and so does the wolf. When they are close enough to touch, the wolf gives him a sniff and then licks him, torso to hair. Harry giggles. He didn't even know he could giggle. He never has before. But he does now. The wolf barks happily and nudges Harry with his nose again. Harry wraps his arms around his neck and the wolf gives him a good shake. He is then swung up, so he is securely on the wolf's back. He screeches with laughter. This is the most fun he has had all year.

He grins at the others, waving happily. The twins return his wave, snickering. Slightly hysterical snickering, but still, snickers nonetheless. His Professor's reactions are less enthusiastic. Professor Black is staring at him, as if he has grown two heads before groaning to himself.

Professor Snape sighs, "Only you, Potter, would be able to tame a werewolf."

Harry shrugs. "I'm Pack apparently," he tells them, not seeing what the big deal is.

This just makes the twins laugh even harder.
He gets the distinct feeling he is missing something, but doesn't know what. And he's not sure he should ask either, not with everyone acting the way they are.

"Perhaps it is time to come down now?" Professor Black suggests, now looking faintly amused.

Harry shifts and the wolf growls.

Professor Black raises an eyebrow. "I suppose not. Are you planning on keeping him all night then?" he asks the wolf, "You realize he is a boy and not a cub? Little boys need to be in the castle where it is warm and not out in the cold. Add to the fact your cub has severe trouble with Dementors, who are patrolling the grounds, I might add. How are you going to protect him then? I highly doubt you can cast a Patronus charm in this form."

Professor Snape has not taken his eyes off of Harry and the wolf the entire time. He still looks scared and Harry wonders why. The wolf doesn't seem to like the Professor too much either, but he won't attack him. Not unless he tries to hurt Harry.

The wolf growls, seemingly offended by Professor Black's questions. Harry knows he has a point, but he feels no real desire to get down. He feels... safe up here. Safety isn't something he has a chance to take for granted, so he is going to take advantage of it while he can.

A Grimm comes along then, barking happily. It's the Grimm he has been seeing all year. And he gets the distinct feeling that he is laughing. Oh. Animagus. Padfoot. Right. He doesn't wave at Black, not sure how he feels about him. He may not have betrayed his parents, but he is still an adult.

"Are you coming willingly? Or do I have to put you on a lease?" Professor Black asks snidely.

Black growls, but comes to stand beside his brother.

They then turn towards Harry again. He shrugs at them. "I'm fine up here," he tells them.

"Unbelievable," Professor Snape draws, "Potter you cannot stay up there all night."

"Moony is safe though."

"Safe? In what world do you live in, pray tell, that you classify a werewolf as safe?"

Harry swallows and then says boldly, chin up, "The one where he makes me feel safer then any person I have ever met, including any Professors, student or ghost. The one where everyone else uses me or hates me or disapproves of me. The one where everyone else thinks they can do as they like and judge me as they want. In what world? This one."

He is sure Professor Snape is about to put him in detention for the rest of his school career. He will be serving them until he graduates. Longer, if he can get away with it. It is common knowledge in Slytherin. You do not disrespect Professor Snape.

But the Professor merely raises an eyebrow at him. "A bit melodramatic, are we?"

"Not from where I'm sitting."

"Hmmm, I see." And that's all he says on the matter. "None the less you are the only person safe around the wolf. And the point of Dementors is a valid one. Or have you simply been eating that much chocolate for the thrill of it?"
Harry blushes. “No Sir.”

“Well then, say goodbye to your pet wolf and let us be off. I suggest leaving him in the Shack. Merlin knows he’ll probably stay if you tell him to.”

And so Harry, shocked he is still in one piece, does. He is sad to leave the wolf, but his Professor does have a point. The idea of Dementors terrify him. He gives a long, tight hug to the wolf and walks away. “Good bye Moony,” he whispers.

Moony howls in return.

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The world is a strange place. And it keeps getting stranger from here.

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Harry will forever remember the Headmaster's face when the nights events are revealed to him. He has never seen the old wizard so shocked before. It rather ruins his image of omnipresence. Not that Harry ever believed it before, but still. It is a look he doubts he will ever see again.

Things go rather smoothly after that, all things considered. Within the week Pettigrew is arrested and Kissed and Black declared innocent. It causes quite a stir among the students. No one knows everything that happen besides those who were there and the students have been sworn to secrecy on the matter.

Not that Harry was planning on telling anyone. Some of the things that were said was highly personal. For one, Professor Snape really would kill him. For another, he has never cared for gossip. For too long he has been the center subject of it all.

Professor Lupin does not finish the school year. Not only did they get lucky that Moony was fond of Harry, the students finally figured it out and wrote home about their werewolf Professor. Needless to say the parents weren't happy.

Harry is sad to see him go because of Moony. He is still wary of the man, no matter that he now knows why he looked at him like he did. Because he is Harry Potter, son of his best mate James Potter. Prongs. Apparently he looks just like James, only he has Lily's eyes. That was the most anyone ever said, if they even bothered.

He is going to live with Black, who is his soulmate. That explained why he believed Black so easily. Two names on his wrist. Sirius Black. Peter Pettigrew. And he finally knows why he has both. No more questions. He also mentioned that Black has Professor Snape's name on his wrist, as well as his own. Which explains a few things as well.

He has major doubts about Black personally. Not only does he not know what to think about the man in general, he has spent the last twelve years in a prison famous for making the inmates go insane. Sure, his animagus form helped. But how much? The Ministry is paying for his Mind Healer, as well as offering him a large amount of money for compensation.

One good thing he did though, was give both him and the twins a present. Two new copies of the Marauders Map. The Headmaster had kept the old one. These ones were keyed specially towards the
boys and only they could use them. They also returned to them if lost or stolen and were made nigh indestructible.

The idea is to use them for pranks and that will surely be done in case of the twins, but Harry plans to use his for security. He is learning that he can never have too many safety nets in place. So many people out there want to either hurt or kill him. Just because, in the end, Black wasn't after him, doesn't mean he is going to get lucky again. That's not the way his luck works.

And then, predictably, at the end of the year, he is sent 'home', with more nightmares than ever.

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No one looks beyond what they expect to see. They go through life, blind to all but their expectations. After all, if they open their eyes, they might get involved with something they don't want to.

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This summer is the worst yet.

More chores.

More nightmares. Strange nightmares. Nightmares that made no sense. Except they did. They made a horrible kind of sense, if one made certain assumptions. Which he did. The nightmares made his scar ache.

More pain.

He is numb by the end of it.

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Where does one nightmare end and another begin?
In which things go from horrible to deadly, nightmares are more than nightmares now, and Harry is still not surprised. In fact, he's rather done.

It is a shock to come back to Hogwarts. To come back to magic. To come back to it all. Not back to life, not quite. Not exactly. The numbness of the summer clings to him like a wet cloak. It surrounds him, not wanting to be far from his body.

The twins help. They talk on and on and on, unceasingly, as Harry does his homework, as always. They never stop once and refuse to leave his side until the feast. In the end, they almost take him to the Gryffindor table with them. If not for the glares, from three different tables including the Professor's, they would have. As it is, they walk him to his seat and stare at all defiantly before going to their own.

Harry sits at the edge of his age group, paying enough attention to them to make sure he isn't tricked, but no more than that. He doesn't bother pretending that he wants to talk to them and they do the same. Ever since second year, they have offered less and less protection. He is use to it by now.

The announcement of the Triwizard Tournament is interesting, but it also makes his stomach hurt. He has a bad feeling about this. Even without his strange nightmares he would worry about it. This is just the kind of thing that would make trouble for him. But with them? Something is definitely going to happen. And it is most likely going to be painful.

The new DADA Professor also puts him on edge right away. First the man is late. And then he has the most alarming appearance he has ever seen – fake eye, wooden leg, wild hair. He gives Harry the chills. He deeply regrets having to take his class. He would skip it, if he thought he could get away with it. Professor Moody is almost as bad as Professor Quirrell. And the only reason he isn't is because he doesn't make his scar hurt.

He can tell it already, it isn't going to be a good year.

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Sometimes, when the nightmares go on long enough, it is hard to tell when one is awake and when one is asleep. It is all the same.

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And he is right.

It isn't.

When his name gets pulled from the Goblet, he stares at the Headmaster in shock. Surely this has to
be some kind of mistake. Surely. They can't honestly believe that he put his name in it, can they? Not only is he not smart enough, not powerful enough, to trick the Goblet, why would he? What motivation would he have to compete in a competition that was banned for being too dangerous? Students have died. And they were Seventh years.

What chance does one, scrawny Fourth year have?

Everyone says he has no choice, he has to compete. It is a magically binding contract. But none of them seem to understand that they are forcing him to his death either. None seem to care that, one way or another, he isn't going to survive this year. Not that it should surprise him, that no one cares. But even the foreign students seem to think he did it.

He doesn't understand. Do they want him dead that badly? Is he that much of a burden that they are pushing him to die? If they want him dead, can't they do it an easier way? A less painful way? Hell, he'd let them. Just give him a painless poison and he would drink it. Clearly his life isn't worth living. Why would he continue? He's not that stupid.

But, once again, no one cares.

In a united front, the whole of Hogwarts once again turns on him. It is a repeat of second year all over again, but worse. This time they aren't afraid of him. They are angry. And angry students can be quite creative when they want to be. Within the first week, he is sent to the Hospital Wing. And it only takes that long because he couldn't hide or fix the result of the curse by himself and the twins forced him.

The Hufflepuffs are downright vicious. Harry wants to laugh. So much for the House that has the reputation for being the weakest. There is nothing weak or mild about them. They are the ones doing the most damage. There is something to be said about strong loyalty.

There is a button campaign, courtesy of one Draco Malfoy, that read 'Potter Stinks' or 'Supporting Hogwarts Real Champion', alternatively. The entire school wears them. Even some of the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang wear them.

None care. Except some do.

The twins have taken to shadowing him constantly. Not like last year. Last year was tame compared to now. He walks in between them, sheltered by their bodies, glares and wands. Any one who thinks the twins are too goofy to be a threat soon find out differently. They are as vicious as the Hufflepuffs. At this point, they have declared war on the school. No one is safe. They make it very clear.

Someone messes with Harry, they mess with them.

There is the small Ravenclaw Harry remembers from the train two years ago. The one with vacant eyes. Only, he soon learns, they aren't as vacant as they seem. Her eyes may look through you, but she sees so much more. She sees beyond the surface, right into a person's center. She talks of nonexistent creatures and vague statements, but she is the most intelligent student Harry has met. Luna Lovegood is a force of nature, if an unexpected one.

And then there is Professor Black. Professor Black who is once again talking to him, if still in secret. Professor Black who insists on teaching him. Training him. Helping him survive. It is positively unnerving to have a Professor help him like this. To have an adult help him. It makes him warier than ever.

His Professor blows hot and cold. One year, he talks to him, the next he abandons him. Yes, he explained that last year he didn't meet with him because of Black, his brother. He didn't wish to be
accused of helping him get to Harry. Yes, it is a good explanation. It makes sense.

But how does he know something more important won't come up again? He can have the best of intentions, but still desert him again. Abandonment is still abandonment, no matter the reason.

And he refuses to make these meetings known publicly.

So Harry will take the lessons, but still watch. Because one of these days, the price is going to come. And he is going to be ready for it. Because the Professor can't actually care what happens to him. That's as unlikely as the Chudley Cannons winning the Quidditch World Cup. It isn't going to happen.

He is lucky he has the twins. He is at the point where he wants to believe they are his true friends. But there is always this tiny voice in his head warning him. Reminding him that he is a Freak. That if his own relatives, his soulmate – whoever it is – can't care for him, how could anyone else? That he is a possible danger, with this terrible power he has inside him. That he is not worth it. He is never worth it.

Who could love a worthless Freak?

That poisonous idea is sounding better by the day.

When he is in the Hospital Wing for a broken arm, he wonders how he would do it. There are several ways. This is a magical castle. Accidents happen. All he has to do is pick a method and find a time when the twins are busy.

No one would miss him. He has been a disappointment to everyone since he arrived at Hogwarts four years ago. No. He has been a disappointment since he was left on the doorstep of the Dursley's ten years ago. And that's assuming his parents actually cared for him. He doesn't assume they loved him. Why would he? They only had him for a year. That is hardly enough time to love someone.

It is an option to consider.

Things are not improved by the articles written by Rita Skeeter for the Daily Prophet. Harry's so called life is splashed on the front page any chance she gets. Which is quite often. What kind of person he is depends on the day. Sometimes he is a poor, misunderstood student just trying to survive. Other times he is an attention seeking prat. Still other times he is the hero turned next Dark Lord.

Nor it is helped by the still strange nightmares he gets, seeing through eyes not his own. They chill him to the core every time. Something is very, very wrong.

And it is a better option than fighting a dragon after all.

When Fred and George deliver the news, he feels like crying. Dragon. He has to fight a dragon. Who in the right mind wants to fight a dragon? Certainly not him. Just because life isn't looking so great anymore doesn't mean he wants to die a fiery death. A jump off the Astronomy Tower would be better. And less messy.

Even more terrifying, Professor Moody is blatantly helping him cheat. He corners him alone after class one day, staring at him intently. Or maybe just staring at him. It is hard to tell.

“Do you have a plan boy?”

Harry flinches at the word. He hates being referred to as boy by other people. It reminds him of his
Uncle too much.

“Not yet Sir.”

“Hmmm,” he leans in closer and Harry leans back, “You do know what the challenge is?”

He nods. “Dragons.”

“Well, at least that's something. What are you good at?”

Harry blinks at him. “Good at?”

“Yes, what are your skills?”

Surviving near death experiences, but he doesn't think that is what the Professor is looking for. Also wielding his dangerous power, but that is never on purpose, so it doesn't count either.

“You have to utilize your strengths boy.”

What strengths? He doesn't have any. He is nothing special, just a disappointment.

He sighs. “You've shown great skill in this class. One of the best students, hands down. This is defense class. You don't need to fight a dragon, you need to defend yourself against one. Understand?”

Harry nods.

“Don't go for anything fancy. Stick with simple, fast and easy. Better to perfect a few useful spells than half manage more impressive ones. Get in and get out.”

“Right Sir. Thank you Sir,” he says and then flees the room, shaken. This is the second adult that has tried to help him and he is terrified. As much as he doesn't truly trust Professor Black, he is still better than Professor Moody.

Use defense spells? It's not a bad suggestion. DADA is, ironically, his best class. Either through need or through interest, those are the spells he finds the easiest. They stick in his head. And, realistically, he knows he isn't stupid. Between his Ravenclaw tendencies, the twins and Professor Black, he knows magic above his age level. He can do it too. But none of that makes him feel any better.

He's smart, but he can't be that smart. He's no Granger after all. She is the one who is always number one in their class ranking. And if you don't count his dangerous power, his magic level is average. It isn't as if he has a large reserve to rely on. Nor is his core fully developed in any case. He is fourteen.

They are sending a fourteen year old to fight a dragon.

In the end, he learns the smokescreen jinx, the shield charm and the summoning charm. It isn't enough. Apparently the judges thought the summoning charm would be too easy of a solution and spelled the egg he was suppose to retrieve against it.

So Harry has to use a skill that has nothing to do with magic. He has to be fast. He never thought he would be thankful for his cousin. But Harry Hunting is the only reason Harry is as fast as he is. And it still isn't enough. He cast “Fumos” as soon as he enters and directs it over a large area. Once his “Accio” fails, he recasts his smokescreen jinx and goes running into it.

The dragon isn't happy. Not that Harry blames her. He isn't any happier than she is. But at least he isn't spitting flames at her. She is. He throws up a quick “Protego” to protect himself. It works, but
only the bare minimum.

His shield charm is the only reason he runs out of the arena with second and third degree burns covering his side, instead of never leaving at all.

The first ones to reach his side are, of course, the twins, followed shortly by Luna and a man Harry doesn't know. He is too busy gritting his teeth in pain to be paying close attention. It's not as bad a being bit by a basilisk, but it is still high up there. Probably number two at this point. He can feel the blood running down his face and side.

And then the wizard points his wand at him and he feels nothing at all. He is unconscious.

He spends the next week in the Hospital Wing, enduring Madam Pomfrey's fussing and anger. Not at him, but at the people who let him compete. She spends her time muttering about 'incompetent fools' and 'meddling wizards' and 'crazy old coots'.

He is told that he will make a full recovery, but there may be some lingering nerve issues. At times, his skin may be too sensitive or it may not have much of any feeling at all. It can go either way with this type of injury. There is also some minimum scarring. Not much because magic is a wonderful thing, but some because dragon fire is nasty stuff. It is mainly on his torso, which bore the brunt of his burns.

He then finds out he scored the lowest, which doesn't surprise him. He is still in the tournament, which also doesn't surprise him. The egg is his next clue, which was fairly obvious. And he is the laughing stock of the whole school, which is so far from a surprise that he could scream. Or sick up. Nausea is a bit of a problem for him right now.

He dreams of fire consuming him. He wishes he had let it. He was one spell away from his wish. One spell. If he wouldn't have used that stupid charm, he wouldn't have to worry about any of this anymore. His mistake.

But life went on.

He spends his days in class, training, doing his homework and avoiding the student population as best as he can. He spends his nights dreaming of death, both old and new. His feeling of dread grows everyday. The numbness that he felt at the beginning of the year suffocates him. It had slowly started to go away, but when his name was called, it came back.

Now it chokes him. Nothing seems to matter anymore. Nothing is important. Why bother with anything? He is going to be dead by the end of the year. Why put in the effort? It will just go to waste. Focusing is hard. Getting out of bed is a challenge. He is always tired now.

Still he goes on.

Luna figures out the clue for him. Dobby steals gillyweed for him. He rescues George and Fleur's sister from the bottom of the lake. He had panicked when George was gone. It was last year all over again. But then he was used for the challenge. Whose bright idea was it to use real people for the challenge? Stupid.

He was worried because he couldn't swim. When would he have learned? Who would have taught him? But he didn't need to worry because apparently gillyweed took care of that. He also didn't need to worry about the people dying at the bottom of the lake if no one came for them. But how was he to know? People had died in this tournament before. And, frankly, he wouldn't be surprised if they really were in danger. This school does not have a good record when it comes to safety.
So life goes on. And then the third challenge comes and brings it all crashing down.

How much can one person take? How many hits? How many disappointments? How much crushed hope? How much can one person take before they break?

He and Cedric grab the Cup at the same time.

A stomach turning sensation.

“Kill the spare.”

A flash of green light.

Tied to a tombstone, confused, scared and helpless.

A horrifying ritual.

A sharp pain from where the blood that was needed for said ritual was ripped open.

The rebirth of a monster.

You can only have so many near death encounters before you wish the person would get on with it. You are ready to die.

“Harry Potter,” Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort, hisses as he caresses Harry's cheek gently. Mockingly. He winces in pain. His head feels as if it is about to explode from the man’s... monster's touch. Can one really be called a man anymore if one resembles a snake more than a human. He isn't going to lie. The absence of the nose is probably what horrifies him the most. Or maybe that is the most horrifying thing he can process out of this whole situation.

“We meet again. Tell me child, not so powerful now, are you?”

Harry doesn't say anything.

“Yes,” Voldemort continues, “imagine my surprise when I first heard of you. Harry Potter, I had carried your name on my wrist since birth. Soulmate or enemy. And then I get word of a prophecy, one that foretells the source of my demise. Two boys, but one name. Yours. Does Fate really think you have the power to defeat me?” he asks derisively.

Harry shakes his head. No. He has to agree with the monster. He doesn't think he can defeat him. As
he sees it, he survived with luck. Luck and his Mum. But his Mum is dead and he used all his good luck that night. Now all he has is bad.

“No indeed. You are a pathetic little worm. A worthless, insignificant thing. How you have managed to survive this long is beyond me. What a sorry excuse for an enemy.”

So Voldemort assumes they are enemies, not soulmates. Well, Harry can understand that. He doesn't think Voldemort has much thought for love. Or anything positive at all actually. But is he right? Or is it just that, an assumption? Can they really be soulmates?

Not that he wants to be soulmates with a monster. But don't they match, in a way? Riddle has already said how alike they are. And they are both murderers. And their wands are brothers. Harry remembers when he first got his wand, how shocked he was. The brother wand to his was the one this Dark Lord he had just heard about owned.

And now it is just another similarity between them.

Can it be possible? He is decades older. He is cruel. He has no room for love. He is a monster. But what is Harry? A burden. A Freak. Bad blood. And, well it would be just his luck to have a soulmate that wanted to kill him.

But as he looks at Voldemort, he decides it doesn't matter. None of it. He doesn't want to know who his soulmate truly is because both hate him. Both wish him gone. Does it matter which one was destined to love him? Obviously Fate messed up.

“Time to die Harry Potter.”

Finally.

“But first,” he presses his wand into the Mark of the nameless man who helped Voldemort complete the ritual. The man hisses in pain, “let us see who of my faithful will return.”

Pops are heard. Men and women appear out of thin air, looking wary. Ah, the wonders of magic. Too bad Harry is in no position to appreciate it.

“My faithful followers,” Voldemort says and he acts as if he is putting on a performance. Maybe he is, “I have called you here today to tell you of my glorious return. But,” he pauses, “I find myself disappointed that I need to tell you this.” He shakes his head, “I have wandered as a spirit for years now. None have sought me out. None have helped me.

“After the abrupt end to my glorious reign, I find myself abandoned. After all I have done for you, none seek to return the favor. Not until recently have any searched for me. I had one faithful find me. And two faithful help me. But only they. No one else tried.”

It is a good performance, Harry gives him that. The monster is obviously a talented speaker. Then again, how else would he have gotten followers to begin with? His looks? But then he sees a flash of Tom Riddle at sixteen and amends that thought. Charm and looks. Yes, that would draw them in. Too bad it is poison under the honey.

“My Lord, forgive us!” someone cries.

“ I do not forgive the weak,” he answers coldly, “Crucio,” he says and the man screams in pain.

“But now,” Voldemort says when he stops the spell, “now is the time for a new era to begin. I have captured my ultimate enemy. Soon there will be no one to stop me. The world will remember why it
should fear me. Soon, the world will be mine once again.”

Harry can't help the annoyance he feels. Oh stop talking and get on with it already. Really, does he ever shut up? Or does he makes grand speeches before every action? Impressive or not, he needs to learn to talk less, do more. Actions speak louder than words after all.

Then two more pops. “Ah, my faithful,” Voldemort announces, “you are here. You shall be rewarded for your loyalty.”

“Thank you my Lord,” a familiar voice says.

“We are truly honored to be able to serve you,” another says.

“Rise my faithful and watch as I end any threat to my rule.”

And then they move int view. Professor Black. Professor Snape.

Harry feels as if the air has been sucked out of him. Yes, he never trusted Professor Black. Yes, he knew Professor Snape hated him. But this? They were on this monster's side all along? They helped him? How could they? Can't they see what he is? Or doesn't it matter to them?

He refuses to look at them. Not because he feels betrayed. No, to feel betrayed you have to have trust to begin with. He didn't. He doesn't look at them because he is so tired of it all. He wants it to be over with. He is ready.

He has been ready.

But then there is movement. A shield forms around him. And then the fighting begins. He watches in astonishment as his Professors take on the others, moving in sync with each other. His breath catches. It is amazing to watch. It is as if they are dancing, each one moving gracefully, always knowing where the other one is, where they will be next.

He has heard stories about soulmates dueling. How they are always aware of the other. How they can move around each other, always together. The true meaning of the word. They can be perfectly synchronized because they are made for each other.

He never thought it was true until now. It is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. Vicious. Those are not Light spells that they are using. That any of them are using. Clearly they are out for blood. As he watches, a woman is decapitated. He should look away, but he doesn't. He can't. The sight holds him captive.

Voldemort seems to be having his own issues. He appears to be stuck, unable to move, unable to duel. Finally, he jerks free of whatever was holding him. But by then his Professors are ready for him. They are the only one left standing now. Just his Professors against the monster.

The spells come even faster now. It is quieter too. Nonverbal spells are being used. He doesn't know what they are, but he can tell they are nasty. The ground is torn up from them. Professor Black is bleeding heavily from the shoulder. It looks as if Professor Snape's leg is hurt. But still they duel on.

Voldemort isn't looking much better. He has a long cut on his left cheek. A bloody cut on his stomach. Dirt covers all of their skin. Robes are ripped and torn. Sweat drips from their faces.

And then Professor Black begins to chant as Professor Snape takes over the duel himself. He doesn't understand a word. At first it doesn't seem to have any effect. And then Voldemort starts screaming. He drops to his knees, clutching his chest in pain. That's when Professor Snape joins his partner in
his chanting.

Harry feels a tugging in his head. In his scar. The tugging gets more and more painful as the chanting gets louder. Finally he can't take it anymore and screams. It hurts. It hurts so bad. Forget basilisk venom, this is the worse pain he has ever felt. All of the pain is in his head, but there is so much of it. He can't tell if he is still screaming or not. Nothing seems real anymore. Nothing but the pain.

He wishes his head would explode and be done with it. He is ready. He's been ready. So why does dying have to be so painful? What has he done that he deserves this? Is his blood that bad? Is he that much of a Freak? Why can't his last moments be pain free?

Why can't he have a peaceful death?

Finally the pain stops. Whether that is because it is done or his body just can't handle it anymore, he doesn't know. He doesn't care. He welcomes the dark as an old friend.

Finally.

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They say each day is a gift and not a right. But when you no longer want that gift, it becomes as welcome as socks at a child's Christmas. That is to say, not at all.

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When Harry wakes up and realizes he is in the Hospital Wing, he begins to sob. He can't help it. It is too much. It is just too much. Why? Why is he still here? Why isn't he dead yet? Why?!

A hand touches his head gently and he jerks away. Professor Black. “Shh child, it's alright. Are you in pain?”

Harry shakes his head, sobs still making his body tremble.

The hand is back, carding through his hair softly. “No,” he manages.

He stops, “No what, Mr Potter?”

“I'm not suppose to be here.”

“Oh? Where are you suppose to be?”

“Dead,” he says before he sobs harder, making talking impossible.

“No child, you aren't suppose to be dead. You're safe now.”

“Never safe.”

“You're not? Ever?”

“Bad blood. Freak. Disappointment. No one cares. No one loves. Worthless,” Harry tells him in between his crying, not making much sense. Repeating what he is to his Professor. Finally letting it out.
“You are a mess, aren't you?”

Harry nods in agreement.

“I suppose we have more to answer for than we realized.”

He disagrees. It's not their fault he is like this. It is his. He is the one with something wrong with him. He is the Freak. He can't blame them for pointing it out when they see it. He has been defective since birth. Bad blood. Burden. Worthless. Freak.

Freak.

A pair of arms startle him as they wrap around him. He squirms, wanting to escape. No. Hugs are traps because no adult hugs him. They want to hurt him, not hug him. No one can care for him, like a normal person. He isn't. He isn't.

“Shh child. Relax. I am not going to hurt you,” the hand is back in his hair, stroking it again, “Calm now. Calm, that's it. Good boy,” he praises when Harry's crying decreases some.

Good boy? He has never been called a good boy before. He's always been called bad. Bad boy. But his Professor thinks he's a good boy. He must be lying. Or confused. But it feels so good and he can't help but lean into the touch. He knows he shouldn't. Knows it's wrong. But he can't help it.

He is just so tired of everything.

“Shh, that's it, that's right. Just go back to sleep now. That's a good boy. That's it. You're safe now. Go to sleep, it's fine. Shh.” His Professor's lies send him to sleep.

When he wakes up again, he is numb. He already knows he is still alive. He knows he will still have to endure. He knows he will have to continue on. For now.

“Awake again baby Lord?”

“You know Harrykinns,”

“There are better ways to ensure your reign,”

“Than by getting kidnapped by the current Lord,”

“And ensuring his demise.”

“That's what Snuffle Rudgins are for,” Luna adds helpfully.

Harry slowly opens his eyes to see the twins and Luna sitting where Professor Black had been. He blinks at them, eyes adjusting to the light. There are dark circles under their eyes, despite their smiles. “You look tired,” he croaks.

Fred hands him a cup of water. “We all can't get our beauty sleep like someone else,”

“Sleeping for two weeks straight. Although,”

“I'm sorry to say, but,”

“It didn't improve your looks any,”

“Certainly not your hair.”
“That would probably take at least a month to fix,”

“More. At least up to six.”

“And then you have your eyesight,”

They shake their heads. “Best not try it again,”

“With your looks, you could be asleep forever.”

That doesn't sound like a bad thing, but he doesn't tell them that. They don't need to hear it. They wouldn't understand.

“Alright you three, you've seen him awake. Now out,” Madam Pomfrey chases the three of them out, checks him over and goes back into her office.

Luna sneaks back in and sits down. “You aren't feeling very well, are you?”

“Why would you think that?” he asks, a bit sarcastically.

She tilts her head thoughtfully. “You've always had a Nargle problem, ever since I met you. But now you have a bad infestation of Three Eyed Jackalburs.”

“Three Eyed Jackalburs?” That's a new one.

She nods. “Yes. They were bad my First year, but they got better. But now they are back. They just keep getting worse and worse as the time goes on. They need to be gotten rid of before they completely take over.”

“Would that be bad?”

“Yes,” she nods seriously, “very bad. The Jackalburs feed off of the will to live. Let them go too long and they will eat the life right out of the person.”

Harry stares at her, slightly shocked. He knows how perceptive she is. How much she notices. But, somehow, he didn't think Luna would know about his death wish. Stupid. Of course she would. The surprising part is that she cares. He's only known her for a year. Why would she?

Luna nods as if he spoke out loud. “Yes, I can see that between the Nargles and the Jackalburs, you have a long road to recovery. Jackalburs can only be gotten rid of by other people, mostly. They stick too well to the person they feed off of for them to do it themselves. It can be painful, but with time and care it can be done.”

And people think this girl is dumb and crazy. Amazing. Not that she helps with those opinions, but still.

She reaches over and kisses him on the forehead. “And don't worry. I'm an expert,” she tells him as she leaves, walking away quietly.

He shakes his head. Well, that was oddly enlightening. But then again, that's how talking with Luna usually is. One tends to come away both confused and informed, if only the person knows what in the hell she is talking about. He's never found that part hard. So she talks in metaphors instead of plainly saying what she means. All that is needed is a little attention to figure it out.

Plus, he is half convinced she is at least part Seer. Can someone be part Seer? Or are they a whole Seer, just with varying levels of skill? Whatever it is, Harry is fairly sure Luna has something. More
than Professor Trelawney in any case.

He sighs and absent miredly traces the names on his wrists, something he hasn't done in a long
time. Not since second year, when he learned the truth. He remembers before Hogwarts, how he was
so excited to meet one of them. How he thought one of them would love him and take him away.
What a long time ago that seems like. What a hopeless wish. Either his soulmate is a monster or the
boy who hates him.

Does it matter? Did he ever had a chance? All he ever wanted was love, but it appears more and
more as time goes on that he will never get it. That he doesn't deserve it.

Draco Malfoy

Tom Riddle

One is dead. The other is out of reach. Perhaps it is time to kill this hope, this dream, once and for all.
He thought he had let go in the graveyard, but it is still there, hanging on by a thread. It is time to let
it go completely. He is not worth it. He has never been worth it.

He wishes he would have died in the graveyard. Why did his Professors have to save him? They
would have been doing him a favor, if they hadn't. Everything is too much and not enough at the
same time. The numbness threatens to consumes him as the pain eats him alive.

He doesn't want to be here anymore.

How does one carry on, when one never expected to survive their teenage years?

When Harry is finally released from the Hospital Wing, he is summoned to the Headmaster's office.
What does he want with Harry? Another speech about how he survived? Another souvenir like the
basilisk fang? Another manipulation, like he did with Mr Malfoy? Because that was manipulation,
pure and simple. He recognized that after the fact.

He doesn't want to go. The Headmaster has always unsettled him and he hates being in a room alone
with him. Almost as much as he hates being in a room alone with his DADA Professors. They
unsettle him at he same level. At least the Headmaster hasn't tried to kill him. Yet.

But when he arrives, he sees he will not be alone. Professors Black and Snape are already there.
Great. He isn't sure which is worse. The strange thing is Professor Snape isn't sneering at him like
always. Instead he is watching him, a speculative look on his face. That just scares Harry more.

"Hello Sirs," he greets softly, taking a seat in the only open chair available. Fawkes startles him by
landing on his leg when he does. He strokes the phoenix's feathers and he croons in approval,
rubbing against Harry's cheek. Well at least someone will protect him if things go wrong.

"Harry my boy," the Headmaster greets happily, "lemon drop?"

"No thank you Sir."
“Ah well, more for me than,” he pops one into his mouth cheerfully, “I suppose you are curious about your latest adventure?”

Professor Snape snorts.

“Yes Sir,” he says, only partially lying. The part that isn't numb is curious. The rest doesn't care.

“Well it appears we have had another slight mix up when it comes to Defense Professors.”

Great, the DADA Professor is involved somehow. Just what he needs.

“It appears that Barty Crouch Jr, who was thought to have died in Azkaban was still alive. His Mother saved his life and his Father kept him under watch, for he was still a Death Eater. But then he escaped and managed to contact Lord Voldemort. He disguised himself as Professor Moody so he could gain access to Hogwarts and thus you. He is the one who entered your name in the Goblet of Fire. He also was able to make the Cup into a portkey, to take you to the graveyard.”

Harry has a strange urge to shout 'I told you so', but doesn't. It wouldn't do any good.

“But what Crouch didn't know was that the entire time, Professors Snape and Black were working against him. They have been on the side of the Light all along, subtly sabotaging the Dark. They have been working for years to find a way to defeat him once and for all, ever since his first fall. And at the graveyard, they did just that. Voldemort is gone and he is never coming back,” the Headmaster says, in obvious satisfaction.

“The boy does not understand. Potter is not a noble minded Gryffindor, no matter how much you wish he was. He is not thinking about your so called 'Greater Good'. No. He is a Slytherin. What he heard was that he does not matter. That no one cares. He heard you tell him he is a pawn in his own life and an unimportant one at that.”

“Come now Severus, no need to be so cynical. I am sure Harry can understand why certain hardships must be endured. It is nothing personal.”

“It never is,” his Professor sneers bitterly.

“Now, now my boy. It is not the time to get into old history.”

“Nor is it ever. You may play at Saintly Grandfather old man, but we all know that isn't true.
Everyone is a chess piece in this little game of yours. Gryffindors at the top, Slytherins at the bottom and the Greater Good ruling over all of it. It does not matter if individuals are hurt as long as the board as a whole is still intact. Potter is just another victim in that long game of yours.”

While the two wizards argue over what is obvious some very old and painful issues, Harry thinks about what he has been told. So his Professors were spies this entire time. That is why Professor Snape acted as if he hated him. That is why Professor Black never acknowledged him outside of their secret meetings. Honestly, it sounds like a load of rubbish to him. Professor Snape obviously hates him and used this as an excuse to bully him. And Professor Black...

Well, it is now clear why he helped him for so long. He found the Professor's price. Bait. He was obviously bait for Voldemort. And to be bait, he needed to be alive and in reasonably functioning condition. So he gave Harry some help every now and again to get him through the year. And then, when the time was right, he lured Voldemort in with him and killed him.

Or he assumed he killed him. He doesn't remember that part. Everything was a bit of a blur at that point. He remembers chanting and a terrible pain in his head, but nothing else. He obviously blacked out at that point.

But at least he now knows what his Professor wanted all along. He can stop looking over his shoulder now. It is done. The price has been paid. And his Professor will have no more reason to talk to him. He watches the argument unfold, wondering if he should interrupt. If he even can. Probably not.

But then Professor Black lays a hand on his partner's shoulder. Professor Snape closes his mouth with an audible snap, but stays silent. “I believe we should continue with this some other time,” he raises an eyebrow at the Headmaster, looking very much like Professor Snape in that moment, “For now, shall we continue telling Mr Potter what occurred?”

“Of course my boy,” the Headmaster answers and does he call everyone 'my boy'? What makes him think that is alright? “Well the spell used was a rather obscure one, which is why it took so long to find. It is also rather difficult, requiring quite a bit of power to complete it. It bound Voldemort together and then sent him into the ground below, dispersing his power.”

“Why... why did my scar hurt?” he asks hesitantly, not sure of he is allowed to ask. Not sure of he wants to know.

“Ah yes, now that was a surprise. You gave us quite a scare. But it appears that on the night Voldemort attempted to kill you, he transferred some of his power to you when the curse backfired. The pain you felt was his power leaving you and binding itself to his newly formed body.”

Harry stares at the man in shock. The Headmaster just announced that like he was announcing what he wanted for lunch. He just told Harry that he had some of Voldemort's power stuck inside of him without blinking. He shudders, feeling suddenly dirty. The need to wash is almost overwhelming. He had part of Voldemort's power inside his head.

It all makes sudden sense now. No wonder he has this dangerous power. No wonder he has bad blood. No wonder he is a murderer. He had part of Voldemort living inside of him. He feels nauseous. This is the final proof he needs. Tom Riddle, Voldemort, was his soulmate. He is the soulmate to a monster.

He lets out a high whine, not being able to handle it. Not anymore. His breathing picks up. His heart
is pounding too hard inside of his chest. He trembles. He curls in on himself. Absently, he recognizes that he is having another panic attack, but he can't stop it.

Fawkes rubs his head against Harry's crooning softly.

“What is it my boy?” the Headmaster asks, concerned.


Harry's breath eventually evens out, but he is still shaking. He can't stop.

“What is the matter?” he asks gently.

Unable to talk, he rips off the cloth and shows him his wrist. Tom Riddle.

His Professor looks at him for a few moments before understanding lights his eyes. “No child, this does not mean Riddle was your soulmate.”

Harry shakes his head and shows him his other wrist. Draco Malfoy.

Professor Black sighs. “I can see why you would worry. It does appear to be a problem. But Harry, Tom Riddle is not your soulmate.”

“Is too,” he insists, needing them to understand. Just for once, they need to understand. “Voldemort put some of himself in me. I had a monster living in me. I have bad blood. I've always had bad blood. I am a murderer. I have a dangerous power. I can kill people with my touch. The Headmaster explained it when I killed Professor Quirrell. I killed him because I have this power in my blood. And now Voldemort put his power in me, so it is his power. And it's been in me for so long it turned me bad. I am dangerous. I am a Freak. I am the soulmate of a monster. Don't you see? I shouldn't be alive. I shouldn't,” he stresses.

“I am not good. I'm not. You said I am a good boy. But I'm not. I've never been anything but a burden and a disappointment. Everyone always tells me I am. I'm never good enough. I'm not good at all. I'm a burden. A Freak. I should have died a long time ago. I shouldn't have been born. I'm not good. I'm bad. Why are you lying to me now? You got what you want? Voldemort is dead. There is no longer a reason to be nice to me. I paid your price.

“You don't have to lie anymore. I know what I am. I know I am never enough. I know I am not worth it. I don't deserve it. Worthless. You can stop now. Stop lying. Stop pretending. I know you don't care. No one does. No one can. Don't deserve it. Not worth it. Pathetic. Weak. Useless. Disappointment. Freak. Stop lying. Stop it!” He is breathing erratically again by the end of his speech.

“Albus,” Professor Snape growls dangerously.

Harry shivers in fear. Not that anyone could be able to tell. He hasn't stopped shaking from his first panic attack. Fawkes trills comfortingly, but it doesn't really help. Not this time.

“I am not lying Harry.”

“Yes you are. No one cares.”
“No one at all? Not even your friends?”

“...The twins...” he hesitates, “maybe, but I don’t understand why. They have no reason to like me. I can’t understand why they stick with me. They promised. Promised to spend the rest of their lives convincing me I am worth it. But I'm not. I'm not.”

“And Miss Lovegood?”

“She can’t be my friend yet. I've only known her for a year. That's not enough time for her to like me enough to be my friend.”

His two Professors share a look. It doesn’t seem like a very encouraging one to Harry. Professor Snape turns his death glare back onto the Headmaster. He is honestly surprised the wizard is still alive. Obviously he feels as if his look is all that is needed to get his point across because he doesn’t say anything. Just glares.

“The Wizarding World has not done you any favors,” Professor Black says, “but tell me, I assume from the state of your back that your so called family has not helped the matters.”

That is enough to make Harry freeze. “What do you mean?”

“The scars-”

“Are nothing,” Harry interrupts, “they're nothing.”

“Don't tell me they are nothing child,” Professor Snape turns his fierce glare onto him now, “I know exactly what those scars are and how they got there. I have enough of them on my own back to have intimate knowledge of the fact. So don’t you dare lie about them to me.”

Harry bows his head. “I'm not,” he says, “they're nothing. I got them because I was bad.”

“And how were you bad? Did you perhaps breathe too loudly? Or was it your mere existence? I assure you, I have heard both.”

“I woke them up.”

“You woke them up?”

He nods, rubbing the scar on his hand. “I scream when I have nightmares and wake my relatives up. Uncle Vernon wasn't happy about that.”

“I see,” Professor Snape says simply, but manages to put more into those two words than an entire book. “He is coming with us,” he then declares.

“Now Severus, surely-” the Headmaster starts.

“No. Don't you dare Headmaster,” Professor Snape says lowly. Dangerously. “I believe you have done enough.”

“And you haven't?” the old wizard challenges.

The look on Professor Snape's face is murderous. Harry is convinced he is one word away from killing the Headmaster. Two words. The Killing Curse is two words. He is sure his Professor knows it. “I have always done my part,” and it sounds more like a warning than anything. Now if only Harry knew what it meant.
He is escorted out of the office in between the two Professors. Fawkes calls out a goodbye from the chair where he had been sitting.

What lies beyond the breaking point? What happens when all the pieces are scattered? Sink or swim. To dream or not to dream. Isn't that always the question?
Living at Grimmauld Place was... odd.

It was located in the last place he would expect a Pureblood residence to be. Right in the middle of Muggle London, between two other Muggle houses. The inside was different too. He was expecting dark and dreary, but it wasn't. It was light and rather open, all things considered. It made sense when Professor Black explained that it use to be dark, but he changed it once he became Lord Black.

“After Sirius left at age sixteen, Mother disinherited him and I became the new Heir. As soon as she died, I remodel the entire house. My brother wasn't the only one who didn't like it here. He was just more vocal about it. Which essentially describes our relationship right there. Sirius is loud and brash and I'm quiet and cunning. We have more in common than he'll admit. But he is so determined to distance himself from this family, that he'll forever ignore anything that doesn't fit his version of reality.”

Harry had expected both Professors to ignore him after they brought them to their home. Either that or give him a list of chores like his relatives. They did neither. Sure, he had rules to obey and one of them was not making a mess of the house or himself, but nothing strenuous. Not like he was use to.

The first thing he had to do was his summer homework, which he did with relish. No more having to rush to complete it the day before. Now he has all summer, plus access to the Black library to help him. The library is every bit of impressive as the one at Hogwarts and Harry cannot wait to go through it. Spending so much time in the library over the past four years really has turned him into such a Ravenclaw.

When Professor Snape insists on looking over them after he has finished, the first thing he demands is why all of his summer work from years past hasn't been this well done. That leads to the awkward conversation about how he has never had access to his school supplies over the summer. Which leads to the even more awkward conversation, on Harry's part at least, of what his summers were really like.

Harry was afraid Professor Snape's head might explode, he looked so angry. But not at Harry. And wasn't that a new experience? If he thought his Professor didn't like his relatives before, he certainly knew he hated them now. He was almost protective of him.

And that is how, twice a week, Harry was forced to talk to Professor Snape about his childhood. He wasn't too happy about it, but he didn't have a choice. He was told he was either going to talk to Professor Snape or a Mind Healer. He chose the lesser of two evils. At least he is familiar with his Professor, if not comfortable. Who knows what a Mind Healer might do.

That was probably the biggest shock of all. Professor Snape wasn't a complete bastard to Harry. Oh sure, he was still sarcastic and sneered at him. But he never laughed or mocked him for what he revealed. He never purposefully belittled him for anything. He wasn't exactly patient or kind, but
there was a certain sense of... protectiveness that had never been there before. And he is as snarky and sarcastic with Professor Black as he is with him.

It was almost as if Professor Snape actually cared.

As if both of his Professors did. Professor Black always took the time to see him each day, no matter how busy he was. Professor Snape actually let him help with his potions. He was only allowed to prepare the ingredients, but still. It was something. They gave him his own bedroom. They made sure he had three meals a day. If he didn't understand something he read, they would explain it to him. Luna said they were doing an excellent job of removing his Three Eyed Jackalburs.

Which was another change. Hedwig was free to come and go as she pleased. He was allowed, and even encouraged, to write his friends. Luna was all stories of the creatures her and her Father were looking for. Black and Lupin wrote. They never talk about anything heavy, but they like to write and check in on him. They tell him stories about his parents at school. Or what country they are currently in. Or the book Lupin is writing for DADA. How Black is adjusting to life out of Azkaban.

The twins talked about their family some and the new pranks they were developing. They were able to start a owl mailing business for their pranks and they were currently looking for a store to buy after they graduated.

Harry is glad they are putting the money to good use. He had given them the money he won from the Triwizard Tournament. He couldn't bear to look at it, after what happened. It was blood money to him. He tried to give it to Cedric’s Father, but he refused it. So he gave it to the twins instead, so they could open their dream store.

Apparently he was lucky that he slept through the aftermath of Tournament. The press went wild and so did the rest of the country. There were celebrations everywhere. Articles were printed and interviews demanded. There were trials of those Death Eaters that weren't killed. His Professors were hailed as heroes, which he privately found rather amusing, even if he did agree.

Some of those Death Eaters were parents to his Housemates. He didn't know what to think. Crabbe’s and Goyle’s Fathers are in Azkaban. Draco's and Nott's Fathers are dead. Does this mean it will be better or worse for him next year? Will they blame him, even if he wasn't the one who killed Voldemort? Or will they continue to hate him as usual?

He doesn't question whether they will be kinder to him or not. He knows they won't. He isn't that stupid. He doubts anything can get them to like him. He is forever the outsider. That isn't going to change.

But overall, things aren't as bad as he had been assuming they would be. He wouldn't say he was happy at Grimmauld Place. But he isn't miserable either. He isn't an outsider here. Everyday, he is shown that he is welcome through actions rather than words. Words mean nothing. Promises can be broken. But actions show what people really mean. So he isn't happy. He isn't all that trusting. But he is... content.

And then the next shock comes at the end of the month.

When Professor Black asks to talk to him, he assumes he has done something wrong. They are in his study, sitting on the couches in front of the fire. Harry stares at the fire, afraid to look elsewhere.

“You're not in trouble little one,” Professor Black reassures him. He still calls him little one, even if he is growing more now thanks to the nutrient potions Professor Snape insists on giving him. “But we need to talk about having another guest in the house and it effects you as well.”
“Guest?” Harry asks.

“Draco Malfoy,” he says.

Harry freezes. Draco. They want Draco here. Of all the subjects he and Professor Snape talk about, Draco has never been one of them. Soulmates have come up, but that was more in relation to Voldemort and why Harry shouldn't think he is the monster's soulmate. Why? Why does he have to come here? He feels almost safe here. Why does he have to come and ruin that?

“He isn't taking the death of his Father very well. Neither is Narcissa for that matter. She is moving to France for the time being, but doesn't want to take Draco out of the country. That means he would have to live with us. Draco is our godson.”

Oh. That makes sense. Of course they would want their godson with them. He is family after all. Harry is just living here out of pity. No one else wants him. He knows how important family can be. They come first. He is to be an outsider once again. That is, if they aren't sending him away. He nods.

“Is that all you have to add?”

“Draco is family Sir. I understand.”

Professor Black sighs. “No, I don't think you do. Not that I blame you, after everything you have been through. Don't think I don't realize you have no real trust in either of us. But having Draco here will not mean we will push you aside, forget about you or send you away. You will both be equals in this house.”

“But Draco is family. He means more,” Harry protests.

Professor Black gives him a long look before nodding. “We weren't going to bring this up right away. We wanted to give you plenty of time to adjust before even mentioning it. But I can see waiting isn't going to do any good now.”

“Sir?”

“Severus and I would like to become your legal guardians.”

What?! Harry stares at the man, unable to speak. He couldn't have heard right. There is no way Professor Black just said he wanted. That both of his Professors want him. To be his legal guardians. To be his... parents? No.

“You are very much wanted Harry. By both of us.”

He looks at him skeptically. Professor Snape wants him.

Professor Black laughs. “I know it is hard to believe, but Severus is in agreement with me. I know he doesn't act like it, but he does care for you. He is just terrible at showing it. Believe me, it took him years to be able to show he cared for me. That's just the way he is.”

“But he's always saying I'm an impertinent brat and a little dunderhead,” Harry says.

“Yes, but you're my brat, which makes you tolerable,” Professor Snape announces from behind him.

He jumps, startled. Professor Snape chuckles. It is still odd hearing him laugh, but he likes it. It is a nice sound. Deep and soothing. “Sir?”
“Yes Potter, brat that you are, I still want you. Why else would you be living here? Or did you think I was doing this out of the kindness of my heart?” he raises an eyebrow.

Feeling bold, he answers, “I thought you were doing it out of the goodness of Professor Black’s heart actually.”

Professor Snape snorts. “Cheeky brat.”

“He is obviously learning from the best then,” Professor Black tells him.

Professor Snape rolls his eyes, but there is a barely visible smile of his lips. “Think it over Potter. We don’t want to rush into these things. One might think we are Gryffindors.”

Harry covers his mouth when a small laugh escapes. Some things will never change. He’s glad. He nods in agreement.

“But Draco is still coming to live with us and I am aware of the potential trouble that will bring. However we will do our best to avoid trouble, correct Mr Potter?”

He nods.

“Good. And yes, I will be having this same conversation with Draco. I am aware of where the majority of the problems begin. I will not force interaction between the two of you, but I refuse to live in a war in my own home. I have already lived through one war zone before and have no desire to do it again.”

“Yes Sir.”

Professor Snape gives a curt nod and leaves the room. Professor Black reaches over and ruffles his hair. “So, have you read anything interesting lately?”

As he talks to Professor Black, he pushes the conversation out of his mind. But that night, he can’t help thinking about it. Nor can he help the sinking feeling in his stomach that this is going to end in disaster.

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What makes a family when blood is no longer involved? Care? Kindness? A desire to provide and protect? Biological bonds are hailed as the strongest bond there is. Too bad that isn’t always the case.

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Having Draco living with them changes everything and nothing at all.

Professor Black still visits with him each day. Professor Snape still insists he talk to him. He still had him prepare ingredients. They still explained things to him. Still seemed as though they cared for him. Still acknowledged him.

But now there are four places at the table during meals. Another person wandering around the house. Another bedroom occupied. Another presence in the library. Another helper for Professor Snape. Another responsibility for Professor Black. Another member of a family where Harry has no place in.
Sure, his Professors talked about becoming his legal guardians. But that does not mean they can't change their minds. Nor does it mean, if they don't, that Harry will become family. There is a mountain of difference between legal guardian and parent. His relatives taught him that. One means they are legally bound to care for him as they see fit. The latter means they actually want and care about him. Care for vs care. A world of difference.

Why would anyone want him anyways? He's nothing special. He never has been, despite his status as the Boy-Who-Lived. That meant virtually nothing anymore. He was a disappointment from the start and now Voldemort is gone for good. And he wasn't the one to kill him this time.

Not that Harry wanted to be the one who killed him. He has done that enough already. He has enough blood on his hands. But he had assumed he would be the one to do it. If he didn't die first. Now he is just Harry. And while that was all he ever wanted to be, 'just Harry' isn't worth very much.

Not that he dare point that out. His Professors have a very ruthless method of dealing with such thoughts. At first Professor Snape had threatened to wash his mouth out with soap, but, well, the panic attack he had was enough to convince them that was a bad idea.

The panic attacks have become a problem ever since the last one in the Headmaster's office. Neither of his Professors were very surprised by this. Apparently he has hit his breaking point, which was bound to happen sooner or later. Now, instead of holding it all in, things tend to come out. Violently at times.

So, instead, he has to write lines. Which doesn't sound bad. Not compared to some of the things he is use to. But they are. The first time he referred to himself as a Freak, he was given his assignment. 'I am not a Freak. I am worthy and deserving of love.'

A hundred and fifty times.

Since then, the number will increase or decrease depending on the circumstance. But it has never been less than the first time. The worse part aren't the hand cramps or the tediousness of it. No. It is how emotionally exhausting it is. He cannot just write it mindlessly. No. He has to think about what he is writing. It is a challenge, some days more than others. He has broken down in tears before. He thought crying was trained out of him at a young age. Not now.

“Hey Potter,” Draco calls.

Harry sighs. At least he isn't calling him Potty anymore. Professor Snape heard him the last time and yelled at him for it. That doesn't mean he is any better now. It just means he is more careful. The other boy hasn't done anything too damaging yet, but he isn't pleasant either. No one is going to mistake them for friends. Hell, Draco can barely pretend civility some days. Obviously his bad days.

He is dealing with his Father's death less than gracefully. Not that he doesn't have a right to be upset. It was his Father. And not that Harry would know the correct way to mourn a parent. For years, he thought they were worthless drunks. Then he found out they were heroes, but didn't have any memories of them. Finally, he got a memory of his Mum, but it was of her death. At that point, he had so much trauma from everything else, it was just another thing on the list.

Still, even he knows getting mouthy with the Professors, godfathers or not, is the wrong way to go about it. So he takes it out on Harry instead. Subtly of course. He even manages to make his last name sound like an insult.
Harry doesn't lift his head from the book he is reading. Maybe, if he is really lucky, he'll go away. Probably not, but he can always hope. He is use to having his crushed.

“Potter, Potter, Potter,” he repeats over and over again. Great, the blonde is bored. And turning to his favorite game. Mocking Potter. His cousin would get along great with the other boy. They can exchange notes on their favorite games. He ignores him.

But then the book is pulled out of his hands. He looks up to see Draco smirking at him. He just stares at him blankly. He doesn't even blink. He isn't the only one who has bad days. But the difference is that Draco lashes out while Harry curls in.

Draco waves the book in front of him. “Want it back Potter?”

Pointless. Childish. Why does he hate him so much that he has to torment him in the tiniest of ways? What was he hurting, reading on the couch? Who was he bothering? Why can't he just leave him alone? He is so tired of it. He is so tired of everything.

Getting out of bed is still a problem some days.

Draco’s smirk fades as Harry doesn’t react. Rule number one, never give them the reaction they want. Never give them a reaction at all, if you can help it. And he can't. He doesn't have the energy for much else. Last night was filled with images he would gladly obliviate from himself, if he could.

“Merlin Potter, blink will you?”

Naturally he doesn't.

Draco throws the book on the ground. “Freak,” he mutters loud enough to be heard, walking away.

“I know,” Harry answers.

“What?” he turns around sharply.

He shrugs. “I know I’m a Freak. I’ve always known that, long before I got to Hogwarts.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My life.”

“Your life?”

He nods. “Funny how you always made jokes about unwanted orphans, but seem so shocked now to know they are true. My entire life people have made it very clear how unwanted I am. How much of a worthless burden I am.” He states this flatly. A matter of fact. Because it is.

“But, but,” he sputters, “you're the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Harry snorts. “Right. Because that did me a lot of good. That title has given me more trouble than anything else. I would trade the fame for someone else's life in a heartbeat. To have my parents back, to have a family that actually loves me, there isn't even a question. I would give it all away.”

“You can't mean that. Everyone wants to be famous.”

“What good has it done for me? I am the burden to my relatives, the evil Slytherin to Hogwarts and a disappointment to the rest of the Wizarding World. Tell me, what is so great about that?”
Draco stares at him in shock.

Honestly he isn't sure why he is having this conversation with him. He knows that anything he says will be spread around school the minute they get onto the train next year. It probably has to do with how done he is. How tired. He shrugs again.

“But what about your soulmate?” he finally asks.


“Your names. I know you have two of them, you keep both wrists covered.”

“And what makes you think I have two? Maybe I keep both covered so people won't know which one to rip off to read.”

“That's too cunning for you.”

“I am a Slytherin you know. The hat didn't put me there just to make my life miserable. Although I can see why you would think that,” he adds thoughtfully.

“Alright then, do you have a soulmate?”

“I fail to see how that is your business. Besides,” he continues as Draco opens his mouth to answer, “I have no desire for the entire world to know my names.”

“And why would they?”

Harry's laugh is bitter. “How would they? Really?” he mocks, “Don't play naive, it doesn't suit you. I know very well anything I say or do this summer is going to be spread about school at the first opportunity. Just further proof of how pathetic I am. Great gossip material, living here.”

“Cynical much?” he raises an eyebrow.

“I've been told it's a defining trait of mine, right along with major trust issues and nonexistent self-esteem.”

Draco doesn't seem to know what to say to that. It is so odd to see him off balance. “So you do have two names,” he says finally.

“Really? That's what you got out of that? How surprising,” he doesn't sound surprised at all.

“So who are they? Two names means you definitely have a soulmate, so who is it?”

“Again, I fail to see why I should tell you.”

“I have your name on my wrist, I have a right to know.”

“You assume we have a mutual rivalry bond?”

“Who else would it be?”

He shrugs and answers casually, “Voldemort?”

“What?” Draco blinks.
And here is that bitter laugh again. “What, did you assume you were the most dangerous person in my life? Did it never occur to you I had bigger things to worry about than your pratty arse? Of course not, you're the center of the universe after all.” He decides he's gone this far, he might as well go all the way. He bares his wrists to the boy, “So you tell me, who is my soulmate? I should warn you, both of the Professors are insistent it isn't Riddle. That's Voldemort's real name by the way.”

Draco stares at him, shocked and horrified.

“That's what I thought.” Harry nods pleasantly. “Good day Malfoy,” he says with cheerfulness he doesn't feel as he walks away, wrists bare.

Draco Malfoy

Tom Riddle

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When the choice is to laugh or cry, which will you chose?

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That night Harry stares at himself in the mirror after his shower. His body is a study of the battles he has lived through. He is still too short. His bones stick out prominently. He is a mass of scars. There is the one on the right arm from the basilisk's fang. The one on his left is from Voldemort's resurrection ceremony. His back is lined with white strips from his Uncle. Dragon fire has warped the skin on his torso. His ankle from where Ripper bit him is still a tangle of jagged lines.

There is nothing physically attractive about him.

Not that that is something he will ever have to worry about. He can't imagine someone ever being interested in him, even if they ignored their soulmate for a chance to be with him. And why would they? It's not as if he has anything going for him. Maybe if he were still famous, in a good way, but he isn't.

And he knows Draco will never be interested in him. For one thing, he thinks they are rivals. For all Harry knows, he could be right and Riddle, Voldemort, really is his soulmate. His Professors can't be right all the time.

Tom Riddle. Voldemort. That has always bothered him, ever since he found out. Why Riddle and not Voldemort? Voldemort is the one who killed his parents. Voldemort is the one who tried to kill him. Shouldn't that be the name on his wrist? Riddle was gone long before Voldemort ever went after him. Is it because that is his birth name? Or is it because while he was meant to be with Tom Riddle, Voldemort destroyed him before Harry ever got the chance?

But then wouldn't his wrist read Tom Riddle and Voldemort? Or just Tom Riddle? The entire thing is confusing and overly complicated. Sometimes he thinks the whole concept of soulmates is more trouble than it's worth.

One thing he knows for sure though, no matter what his wrists claim, he is destined to be alone.

For who could ever love a Freak?
Reflections are funny things. People like to say they are the purest form of truth. What you see is what you get. What they fail to remember is there is another factor involved: themselves. Perception is a powerful thing. Remember, you are your own worst critic.

Draco was quiet around him after that. Watchful. It was as if he didn't know how to act around him, now that he knows what he does. It makes for a peaceful time. When asked, he admits the conversation to Professor Black, but nothing comes out of it. All he does is nod thoughtfully. And so time passes.

“Harry,” Professor Black says one day at lunch, “will you please write your godfather and tell him whether you would like a broom for your birthday or not. He has been bothering me for a week now. If not, for the love of Merlin, tell him what you do want.”


“Yes Potter,” Professor Snape answers, “the day in which the world was first blessed with your glorious presence,” he snarks, “It is a day where decent people throw a party filled with noise and candy for the brat in question.”

“A party?” he then repeats.

“Yes, a gathering of other demons fueled on sugar, cake and excitement.”

“And presents?”

“Obviously.”

“For me?” he asks, just to be sure.

“No Potter, for the Dark Lord. Yes for you,” Professor Snape answers, clearly exasperated. Although he can't be surprised that Harry is so shocked, given what he knows.

“Merlin Potter,” Draco says, “you act as if you never had a birthday party before.”

“I haven't.”

Draco stares in disbelief. And now here is another reason for him to stare. Oh goody. He doesn't say anything to that.

The grass is not always greener on the other side. Sometimes it takes a kick to the head to realize that.
Harry's birthday arrives quickly it seems. Life is almost pleasant now that Draco has stopped bullying him every chance he gets. He does have a party, with his friends and sugar and presents just as Professor Snape described. He told his two Professors he didn't need a party, but they didn't listen.

It was a small gathering. The only other people besides the house's residents attending were the twins, Luna, Black and Lupin. Not that he would want anything big. He barely knows what to do with this. The twins steal him right away to make sure he is alright. Apparently letters aren't enough for them. With some coaxing he tells them of his summer so far. Even the parts he left out in his letters.

“You don't have as many Jackalburs,” Luna tells him, delighted.

He nods. “Professor Snape is determined to remove them. Painfully,” he tells her.

“Yes,” she agrees, “I can see why. He has a slight problem with them as well. It can't be very comfortable taking care of someone else's.”

Black does give him a broom. Mainly because Harry didn't know what else to ask for. Lupin gets him a few books on DADA, since it was his best subject in school. Luna gives him an ouroboros necklace. The twins give him a pass for a lifetime supply of pranks, free. He protests, but they insist.

“For our favorite baby Lord,”

“For our favorite baby Lord,”

“He has a slight problem with them as well. It can't be very comfortable taking care of someone else's.”

“Who without his support, our business would never exist.”

“Besides, think of this as an inspection.”

“You have to make sure your investment is being well spent.”

His Professors give him chocolate, knowing what a sweet tooth he has. And now that he is no longer sick of it, having recovered from Third year. Draco doesn't give him anything, but he wasn't expecting him to, so it's alright. He's surprised he is even here. The same goes for his Professors. They didn't need to get him anything. They have already done enough.

They are the first to leave, Professor Snape exiting with a scowl and a headache, his partner following amused. Draco slips away quietly when no one is looking. Black and Lupin finally leave with Lupin dragging Black along. “If we don't leave now Sirius will want to stay forever and neither of your parents can handle that.”

Parents. He just called his Professor's his parents. How odd.

His friends are the last to leave. They stay until the evening, laughing and making fools of themselves, in the twins case. Harry has never laughed so hard in his life. Is this what having friends is like? True friends? Ones who won't abandon or betray you? It's an odd feeling, but he thinks he likes it. Having friends... it's different, but good, he thinks.

But as it turns out, he hasn't opened all of his presents yet. Because he hadn't be given them all. His Professors come in while he is sitting at the table, looking through one of the books Lupin gave him.

“Harry,” Professor Black says as he sits, Professor Snape beside him, “Have fun?”

“Oh yes Sir, it was the best birthday I've ever had,” he answers happily, “Thank you.”
“As it was hard to beat,” Professor Snape dryly adds.

Harry shrugs. It wasn't, but it was still a fun day.

Professor Black smiles. “That's good,” And then, more seriously, “now, I am not sure how much thought you have given to us being your legal guardians and there is still no pressure to decide yet. But we wanted to give you another option as well.”

“What?” he asks, nervously.

“While we were obtaining permission to be able to become your guardians, the question of adoption came up.”

Adoption? What?!

“As it turns out, it is also a viable option if you would want it. There is no pressure to chose one or the other or even either of them. But we wanted to tell you all of your options before you decide on one.”

Harry's head is spinning. “Adoption. That would mean... I would be your... You would want to be my parents?” he finally manages.

“Yes,” Professor Black says simply.

He looks at Professor Snape.

He raises an eyebrow. “Do we need to have another conversation about certain impertinent brats and their level of tolerance?”

“No Sir.”

“Good. I would hate to think your memory is that poor. Or that the Gryffindors,” he sneers, “have been rubbing off on you too much.”

Harry huffs. “Gred and Forge aren't that bad.”

“The fact that you refer to them as such is not encouraging. In any case, it is in their very nature to corrupt and help others form bad habits.”

Harry smiles. No, Professor Snape will never like Gryffindors. “Thank you Sirs,” he says instead.

They nod and get up to leave. “And Harry, I would say it is about time that you call us by our first names, isn't it? You have been living here long enough.”

He looks at them in shock, but nods. “Yes Sir, Regulus,” he agrees automatically.

He smiles.

Professor Snape glares. “And do not think you can get away with liberties,” he adds.

Oh.

“My name is Severus,” he stresses, “not Sev.”

Oh. Draco calls him Uncle Sev sometimes. He doesn't like it. At all.
“Yes Severus,” he echoes.

“And remember Harry,” Prof- Regulus says, “no pressure. No rush.” They both leave the room.

Harry doesn't know what to think. The entire conversation makes his head spin. He remembers Lupin referring to the two Professors as his parents, but he never thought it could be true. But it can, if he wants. Does he? Does he dare? Could he take that chance and have them change their minds? Or not and regret never having the chance to have actual parents? Adults that really do want him and care for him.

This is going to take some serious thinking. He’s not a Gryffindor after all, he thinks amused. He gathers his things and takes them to his room. He isn't in there for more than a few minutes when someone knocks on his door.


He looks at the other boy. “I didn't want to give it to you earlier. I don't know if any of your friends know about your names.”

The sentence puzzles Harry until he unwarps the box and opens it. Inside are two black leather bracelets, wide enough to cover his names. They are beautiful, a Celtic knot pattern carved into them. “And there are protection spells on them – against wear and water, thief, moderate jinxes, hexes and curses. Once you put them on, you are the only person who can take them off. I thought it would be easier, this way,” he shrugs as if it is no big deal.

And maybe to him, it isn't. But to Harry, it means much, much more. It represents a new start as well as a useful and thoughtful gift. Although, with the way Draco is standing there, trying not to fidget, he knows it means something more to him as well.

He smiles. “Thank you Malfoy,”

“Draco,” he corrects.

“Draco.”

He nods. “Happy Birthday Potter.”

“Harry,” he tells him.

“Harry,” he agrees and leaves Harry alone in his room. He slips the bracelets on, staring at them. They really are beautiful. And convenient. They fit comfortably on his wrists. He stares at his empty doorway thoughtfully. It looks as if he has more to think about than he thought.

Tom Riddle
Draco Malfoy

Who knew?

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What's after the breaking point? Life's next adventure. Are you ready?
Year 5 (epilogue 1)

Chapter Summary

In which things come together.

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warning: dub-con/non-con** All of this happens in dreams, there is no actual rape. But there are two nightmares that do deal with it. They can be skipped if need be. It's fairly obvious fairly quickly where they are. One is it's own section and the other is in the first half of a section.

Also, in case it wasn't obvious from the warning, **this chapter is rated M**. It is the only chapter rated so, which is why the rest of the story is rated T. If none of this is your thing, feel free to skip this epilogue and move on to the other.

First off, I want to thank everyone so much for the wonderful comments so far. They made my day, each time I read one. And you may have noticed, I'm horrid at responding to them. But I love them all the same. People loved it and I am so glad (see-pain in the ass to write/edit after a while). I am also extremely , and strangely, proud of the number of people I made cry. Shit happens.

I wasn't planning on adding onto this, but then my brain stared thinking and ta-da! Another damn 14k words. *Don't be expecting anymore after this.*

Not sure if this is less angsty because it is a slightly lighter tone or worse because of Harry's nightmares...

Harry sits on his bed, fiddling with the bracelets Draco gave him for his birthday. He had put them on once the boy was gone and hasn't taken them off since. The bottom is soft against the skin of his wrist. The top is warm where he traces his finger over the pattern, again and again. Now, instead of tracing the names on his wrist, he traces the designs on the band.

And it is fitting that he does so, for it is the boy who he is thinking about now. Draco Malfoy. He has changed, since his birthday, a week ago. Or he appears to have changed. There has been a shift in their relationship and Harry cannot understand what it is. Draco has been... nicer to Harry. He had stopped mocking him before, but now it goes farther than that. Now he smiles and talks to him. Tentatively. As if he is unsure he is doing the right thing.

But why would he wonder that? Why would he care? He never did before. He took delight in making Harry's life as miserable as he could. Ever since that first declaration in first year, he has gone out of his way to make it clear he hates him. Now he is doing the opposite. Now it seems as if he is trying to show he cares.

He doesn't know what Draco wants. That is the real problem. He could deal with the change in attitude, if only he knew what Draco wanted. If he had more faith in people, maybe he would believe
Draco is trying to make it up to him. To apologize, through actions, for the past four years. But Harry doesn't have that faith. Nor is he is Gryffindor. He is a Slytherin. He knows better.

Everything has a price.

So while, yes, he understands that Draco is making an overturn at *something*, he doesn't know what exactly it is. Nor does he know why. He knows he has to think, but about what?

It's maddening. All of a sudden, he can't get the blonde out of his head. He thought he was past this. Thought he no longer cared about soulmates. They only bring pain. People can talk all they want about how great they are. For Harry, that is never true.

And he doesn't care. He *doesn't*. What is the point? A monster or the boy who hates him. It is never going to turn out well, so why would he care? Life has brought him enough pain, without this. He is better off alone. He does not care about his soulmate. He has no reason to.

And yet...

He pulls his hair in frustration. And yet the hope refuses to die completely. It's still there. It may be small, a fragile thread in a strong wind, but it still exists. It's still there. It lies right next to the sassy part of his mind that he always buries. It is just as helpful to him as his hope.

Maybe that's part of the problem. Both Regulus and Severus have been encouraging that part of his mind to come out more. Not that Severus ever encourages disrespect or cheek. But he has a habit of smirking whenever Harry says something particularly sarcastic. Regulus assures him his partner finds it entertaining, even if he'll never admit it. It shows spirit.

It shows he is not broken. He can carry on. It is the Slytherin way, to thumb his nose at the rest of the world when they try to keep him down. When they try to tear him apart simply for existing. He will not yield. He will not hide. He will not surrender.

He is a survivor.

Every day he goes on, he is a survivor. Every time he smiles. Every time he laughs. Each time he relies on a friend instead of going on alone. It shows he can go on. That they haven't broken him yet. That he is stronger than they are. He can take what they throw at him. They will never win.

At least that's what he's told. Some days he doesn't believe them. Some days it feels as if the world has won. What does he have after all? Massive trust issues, depression, nightmares, ptsd, and a mass of scars. That's not anything to be proud of. It's a list of failures, not accomplishments. So what if he is still here? He doesn't want to be, not really. Not most of the time.

But still he carries on. Not gracefully, but he does. Luna tells him the Jackalburs haven't won yet. He wishes there was a potion to get rid of them all at one time. He had asked Severus, once, if there was. All the man did was laugh. A bitter laugh, but a laugh none the less. He took it as a 'no'.

All this trouble over two stupid names. Who even decided what they meant anyways? Maybe they aren't the names of your soulmate and your rival. Maybe they are just the names on the two people you will interact with the most. Or maybe they are the two who will make the biggest impact of your life. The latter is certainly true for him. No one can explain how the names work. They put it down to magic and call it a day.

That doesn't sit well with Harry. He doesn't have any faith in destiny and no trust in fate. Both have screwed him over far too many times for him to. He doesn't believe in a faceless, nameless being who decides how life is run. He believes in things he can touch. The unseen is never for him. It's one
of the reasons he hates Divination so much. Besides the fact he is convinced the Professor is out to get him. Why else would she predict his death so much?

Magic is not some unexplained, mysterious phenomenon. It has rules and regulations, just like everything else. It has it’s limits as well. So to explain something away by magic does not work. Magic can be explained. Not to do so is both stupid and ignorant.

Nor is magic perfect. Nothing is perfect and magic is no exception to this. Mistakes can be made, spells ruined or mutated, potions changed. Nothing is forever. Everything adapts. The world would not exist if it did not. So by that logic, magic can makes mistakes. If soulmates are magic, can soulmates be mistaken as well? Could the names be wrong?

He has never voiced such thoughts. He knows how that would go. He would be seen as even more of a freak than he already is. Society as a whole holds soulmates to be sacred. Nothing is more special, more extraordinary, than soulmates. Even the names of the enemies are held to the same level.

It is as if the two words printed neatly on your wrist is in charge of your entire life. It is absurd. But Merlin forbid you question it. Clearly there is something wrong with you if you do so.

As he there aren't enough things wrong with him.

He gives his hair another sharp tug for good measure. This is ridiculous. He shouldn't be wasting time thinking about such rubbish. And that is what it is, rubbish. But he can't help it. There is some part of his brain that cannot let it go, no matter how much he wants to. He assumes it is the part of his brain that absorbs all social expectations and cues. He was raised in this culture of thought his entire life, be it Muggle or Magical. There will probably always be some part of his brain that categorizes it as important. That doesn't mean he has to agree with it.

Still, he wishes that part of his mind would belt up. He doesn't need the added stress. Things are bad enough without worrying about the social concept of soulmates and enemies. He has other things on his mind.

But it would potentially explain why Draco is acting the way he is. If the blonde boy has decided that Harry is his soulmate, than he would want to make amends. He want to be with him, romantically. Maybe. It could be that the idea is better than the actual thing in this case.

Or maybe his Godfather's lessons have finally gotten through his thick head and he is attempting to be a decent human being. They have been talking with him quite a bit. Severus will talk with Harry about his issues and Regulus will talk to Draco about his. So, maybe that is it.

He believe that less than his first theory.

Or maybe it is neither. Maybe this is all a cruel prank and as soon as he lets his guard down, Draco will strike. He has never forgotten that first Christmas, with the prank 'present'. He remembers the hope he felt and how quickly it was crushed. It is always that bloody hope that gets him into trouble. It has done him more harm than any of the dangers he has faced.

More than dragon fire, more than basilisk venom, more than Dementors, hope has proven to be the most dangerous thing is Harry's life. It burns more than anything. It drags him down deeper than anything. It tears him apart more viciously than anything else he has encountered. Hope is the true enemy because it can destroy you better than any hate can.

It is this theory that he fears most of all. Because it is the most likely one to be true.
Do people ever really change? Can they? Do they have that ability? Or do they simply hide parts of themselves from the world, showing them as need be?

“Harry Potter,” Tom Riddle greets.

He is back in the Chamber. It is the same as it was last time. Water lays in puddles around him. There is a chill in the air. The walls are an unforgiving grey. It is all the same. Only this time he is alone. Ginny is not there, laying, dying, on the ground.

“I have been waiting for you Harry Potter,” he continues, “for a very long time now.” He walks closer.

Harry backs up. “Stay away from me.”

“Oh come now, is that anyway to greet your soulmate?” he asks, mockingly. He continues forward as Harry backs up. He looks like a predator, stalking his prey. And that is exactly what Harry feels like. Prey. There is a hungry look in Riddle's eyes.

He backs into something hard, but smooth. He feels it. Scales. And then he hears the hiss. It is the basilisk. He turns to run, but can't.

“Come now, don't be like that. You don't want to upset my pet, now do you?” Riddle closes in, bracketing Harry with his body. The basilisk completes the circle. He is trapped.

He begins to tremble. “What do you want?” he asks, trying to sound brave, but failing.

“Why I thought it would be obvious. You of course.” He reaches up and gently strokes Harry's cheek. “Such soft skin,” he murmurs, “smooth, unblemished. You are beautiful.” He crowds closer.

Harry shivers.

“Shh, no need to be afraid now. I won't hurt you. We belong together.” He then bends his head and kisses Harry. It is a soft kiss. A gentle one. He massages his lips with Harry's own. It feels good. Nice. Pleasant. It is not at all forceful as he feared it would be.

Riddle's hand slips under his shirt and caresses his stomach and then his chest. He brushes a nipple and Harry can't help but gasp at the sensation. Riddle chuckles into the kiss and does it again. Harry shivers again, but this time it isn't in fear, but pleasure. He has never felt like this before.

“That's right little one, just feel,” he encourages as he begins to play with it. He runs a finger over it, again and again. He pinches it and then soothes it. Then he begins again. He brings his other hand down to do the same with the other.

Harry's hips jerk in response.

“So very sensitive. I wonder what will happen when I do this?” he lowers his hand, brushing the front of Harry's trousers. Harry gasps.
Riddle chuckles again. “That's it. Tell me how it feels,” one hand continues to play with his nipple and the other rubs the front of his trousers softly.

Harry trembles. He leans back, but the feeling of scales brings him back to himself. He shakes his head. “No,” he protests, “No. Stop, I don't want this.”

Riddle gives a hard squeeze to his shaft. “I do believe your cock says otherwise.”

“No, don't. Please don't.”

“Just relax little one. I told you, you belong to me. I will take good care of you.”

“Please,” he begs.

“You are mine. I take care of what is mine.” He puts more pressure on his cock, rubbing it harder through his trousers.

Harry shakes. It feels so good. It shouldn't. This is wrong, so very wrong. But he can't help the buck his hips give, seeking more friction.

“Yes,” he hisses, “that's right. Feel it. I want you to feel it and remember who you belong to.” He lowers his head and runs his lips softly over his neck. When he finds a particularly sensitive spot, he sucks on it, marking it. There most definitely is going to be a bruise there. Riddle is making sure of it.

He bites his collarbone gently and Harry keens. What is happening? How can this feel so good? His hips give another helpless jerk. “Please,” he says again and now he isn't sure if he is begging Riddle to stop or continue.

“As you wish,” he says. He unbuttons the trousers and reaches in, touching his cock with his hand. Harry gasps. It feels even better without the barrier of clothes between them. He closes his eyes, body focused on the pleasure while his mind revolts.

Riddle strokes him slowly, playing with his bollocks every so often. He opens Harry's shirt and sucks a nipple in his mouth, biting and licking it. He then switches to the other one. And then he switches again. All the while his hand steadily strokes him.

Harry is incoherent by now. His hips are moving by themselves, seeking all the friction they can find. He keens and groans and sobs out his pleasure, never wanting it to end. It feels so good. He never knew it could feel so good.

He can feel a tingling in his bollocks. “I- I'm goin- oh!” he tries to say.

Riddle slows down his hand and Harry wails. “Who do you belong to?” he asks.

He shakes his head, unable to reply.

“Come now, only good boys get to come. Now tell me, who do you belong to?” he gives another firm stroke, “Be a good boy and tell me.”

“Y- y- you,” Harry stutters.

“What was that?”

“I belong to you!” he manages to yell.

“Good boy,” Riddle praises, “that's right. You belong to me. You are my soulmate. Mine.” He
gives Harry a final squeeze and he comes with a shout.

Harry jerks up in bed with that shout still on his lips. He looks around, seeing he is still in his bedroom at Grimmauld Place. His pants are wet. A horrified feeling comes over him and he shudders. It was all a dream. Just a dream. But what a dream it was. He curls up in a ball and closes his eyes, trying to get to forget the feel of those hands on him.

It doesn't work.

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Sometimes hell is not a place, but a state of mind. Thoughts and fears run wild. The mind can make a heaven out of hell or a hell out of heaven. Sweet dreams.

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“Harry,” Draco greets at breakfast one morning.

Harry nods in return. He is still not use to the other boy calling him by his first name. It sounds unnatural on his tongue. No matter that he has a habit of thinking of him as 'Draco', he doesn't call him that out loud. He is Malfoy. Always Malfoy.

“Great news,” he is grinning, “Severus has agreed to take us to the Manor so we can fly.”

Harry nods again. He can see why Draco is excited. He loves flying. He is the Seeker on their Quidditch team. The only time Harry has flown was in their first year, during lessons. And even then, he stayed close to the ground. Not because he wanted to, but because he was trying to draw attention away from himself. And from the way classes went, with the Gryffindors, it wasn't hard to do. He hasn't even had a chance to try his new Firebolt yet.

Draco is practically bouncing in his seat, looking most undignified. Is flying really that great? He is probably excited to go home, for however short a time, as well. He assumes that is where they are going. After all, how many places would he simply call 'the Manor'?

Severus walks in, takes one look at him and snorts. “Do try not to hit the ceiling Draco,” he comments, “I would hate to have plaster in my food.”

Draco grins. “Sorry Uncle Sev.”

Severus raises an eyebrow at him. “We have not left yet. I can still change my mind.”

“But you love me too much,” he tells his Godfather.

Severus snorts. “Either finish eating or get ready. I would like some peace before I have to endure a morning filled with obnoxious excitement and reckless behavior.”

Draco shoots up from the table and runs out the door. “Ta Uncle Sev,” he yells as he leaves.

Harry keeps his head down and calmly continues eating.

Severus sighs. “Regulus owes me,” he mutters to himself.
“I can stay here, Sir, if you want,” he offers.

“What Potter, not excited? One would think you would want to test out your new broom. It is the fastest one on the market. Shouldn't that appeal to young, reckless dunderheads such as yourself?” he asks lightly.

Harry shrugs. “I never really flew before.”

“And you have no desire to do so now?”

He shrugs again, not saying anything.

“I require a verbal answer Mr Potter.”

He always does. “I'm not all that into Quidditch, so what's the point? Isn't that what flying is all about?”

“According to your peers? Yes. But you are allowed to fly just to fly as well. Being obsessed with Quidditch is not a requirement. It is a perfectly respectable hobby by itself.”

“I thought you said 'that only dunderheads partake in such a reckless and wasteful activity’?” he quotes with a small smirk.

Severus snorts. “And I stand by what I said. I see no appeal in it. But I do believe that you will find it a relaxing activity. You flew well in your first year.”

Harry looks up, surprised.

“Just because I appeared to hate you, does not mean I was not watching. Being a spy means you take in the mundane as well as the thrilling.”

Harry nods thoughtfully. More evidence that Severus is not the bastard he acts like. He has been keeping track of these things, ever since Regulus asked to be his legal guardians/parents. He is still no closer to deciding now then he was then. But he is thinking about it.

“James was also an excellent flyer. He played Chaser for Gryffindor all six years,” Regulus tells him as he walks into the kitchen. He is more likely to mention James than Severus. He doesn't have the same blinding, all consuming hate that his partner has. Oh, he still hates James, but he can bring himself to mention the name. For Harry's sake at least. And he paints the name in a more realistic light than Sirius ever does when he mentions him. Severus, on the other hand, will mention Lily rarely, but Regulus will never talk about her at all. Harry doesn't know why and he has never asked.

Harry doesn't know what to think about them. The first time he saw them, in the Mirror of Erised he was enthralled. Not only was that his first time seeing them, it was his hearts deepest desire. A family of his own. Of course his parents appeared. And they saved his life, when Voldemort tried to kill him as a baby. Then again, he isn't exactly what you call thankful for that. Some days he wishes they let the monster do what he wanted. They could have replaced him easily enough. They didn't have to die.

Black likes to tell him about his school days with James and Remus. He was never really comfortable with that. It wasn't the pranks themselves that was the problem. He never would spend time with the twins if it was. But some of those pranks... Well, actually, it was many of those pranks that sounded too close to bullying to him. Especially the ones involving Severus.

In the early days, when Black first started writing him, it was almost as if he was mixing Harry up
with James. Or he thought he should be more like his Father. He supposes it is understandable. The man did spend fifteen years in Azkaban after all. But it didn't make it any easier to deal with. And he is better about it now. Somewhat.

So he has mixed feelings when someone brings them up. At least he knows neither Regulus nor Severus are telling him these things so he can be more like them.

Harry leaves the table and goes to his room to get ready. Draco is waiting for them in the hall. He has his broom in his hand and a smile on his face. He has never seen him act like this. Like a kid. He has never seen him this honestly happy or excited before. It is a good look on him, Harry decides.

“We are taking a portkey,” Severus tells them.

Harry's stomach drops. Portkey. Just the name makes him nauseous. He can't help but connect that name to that day, when he was stolen away to the ceremony where Voldemort was resurrected and killed. It isn't a memory he cherishes. Draco doesn't notice, but Severus does. Mainly because he knows how he feel about them. He is probably using one so Harry can face his fear.

Bastard.

He takes a deep breath and holds onto the sock tightly, as well as Severus. He also suspects he is the reason the portkey is a sock. He can't picture the man using one ordinarily. But what is less intimidating than a sock? There is a feeling of a hook in his stomach and then weightlessness.

Less than a moment later, gravity returns and Harry ends up almost on his face. It is only Severus' strong grip that keeps him stable. Oh how he hates portkeys. He really does.

Draco lets out a whoop, mounts his broom and takes off without a word. Severus hands Harry an anti-nausea potion. He grimaces at the taste, but doesn't hesitate to drink it all. Potions may taste bad, but they work well. Severus isn't a Potion Master for anything.

The two walk towards Draco's Quidditch field set up behind the Manor. He looks around curiously as he does. The blonde boy's attitude now makes even more sense than before. The grounds are large and beautiful. The Manor is huge. Albino peacocks wander the gardens for some strange reason. It is a classic home of a rich, spoiled brat. The very definition of Draco Malfoy.

“In the air,” Severus commands, “I do not plan on spending all day here.”

Harry sighs, but obeys. He knows there is no way around this. And he really should try his new broom at least once. It isn't a cheap gift by any means. He mounts and kicks off. He is up in the air in an instant. It takes a few moments to remember the lessons Madam Hooch taught him, but it doesn't take long. Soon he is above tree level and then at hoop level. He leans forward and shoots off.

The wind blows through his hair and he finds himself grinning. He twists and performs a perfect spiral. He find himself laughing. He does it again and then does a small dive. Before he knows it, he is flying through the air as if he has been doing it all his life. As if he was born to fly. He has never felt so free. It is as if nothing exists anymore beside the sky around him and the broom beneath him. He let's out a whoop, sounding like Draco now. He doesn't care.

It is only when he hears a sharp, “Potter,” that he remembers the rest of the world. Or, technically, he remembers Severus. He looks far below him to see the Professor glaring up at him. Well, he assumes he is glaring anyways. It is still his default expression. He goes into a steep dive, pulling up at the last moment, less than half a meter from the ground.

Severus is not impressed. “Are you trying to kill yourself?” he snarls.
Draco, on the other hand, “Merlin, Harry, that was bloody amazing! You're a natural.”

Harry shrugs at them both, staring at the ground. He knew he would be fine, he doesn't see what the big deal is. But Severus is funny about him taking risks. And Draco should know how easy that was. And the compliment? Is he going to do that now? There is nothing amazing about him.

Severus sighs. “Home brat, before you give me a heart attack.”

They take the portkey back to Grimmauld Place and Harry takes a shower. Severus doesn't say anymore about his dive, which surprises him. He thought he would, at the least, get a lecture on safety. But he doesn't. He is left alone. Which is fine with him. That's the way he wants it. He is in an odd mood and company would only make things worse. It happens sometimes.

That night, he dreams of flying.

Freedom from the Earth's gravity is wonderful thing. There is noting weighing you down. Nothing can touch up, up there.

The rest of the summer follows the same. At least once a week, either Severus or Regulus would take them to the Manor to fly. Severus still forced Harry's biweekly sessions with him. Regulus still worked with Draco and made time for him. Draco was still nice to Harry. The twins, Luna and Black continued to write.

Thoughts and doubts still circled in his head. Panic attacks occurred, although they were finally lessening. And the nightmares continued to plague his sleep, no matter what he did.

He is forbidden to use a silencing charm, so that means sleepless nights for more than just him, if he is not careful. At least he is much better at biting his hand to keep quiet now. Not that either Professor agrees with him. Apparently it is not a healthy response. He is just trying to let them sleep. No reason for them to deal with every one of his dumb problems.

Before he knew it, it was time to return to Hogwarts.

Drown in the noise of life.

The first indication that something was wrong started at the train station. Severus and Regulus dropped them off and then flooed to Hogwarts. The twins and Luna met him and they secured their own compartment. Draco had nodded at him and went off to find his friends. Nothing unusual. Harry wasn't expecting anything else. He very much doubted he was going to see much of Draco from now on.
But then there was a knock at their door and when they opened it, Draco was outside. “May I enter?” he asks politely.

Harry nods, looking the boy over. He is holding himself stiffly. There doesn't appear to be anything physically wrong with him, but something is off. Maybe someone said something to him. He still isn't exactly over his Father's death, even if he is better.

There is an awkward pause before Luna comments, “Nargles,” and the three of them nod.

Draco blinks at her. “What the hell is a Nargle?”

“They like to steal your homework and hide your shoes. They’ve very tricky.”

“Oh, is that why you're always barefoot?”

“We thought you just used that as an excuse,”

“And you were actually holding a protest,”

“Against the use of shoes.”

Luna giggles, but doesn't deny it.


Draco looks at them like they are crazy, but sits beside Luna none the less. He doesn't add much to the conversation, mainly content to stare off into the distance. The twins send him a questioning look, but he shrugs. Something is going on, but he doesn't know what. He is getting one of those feelings again. That is never a good sign.

They arrive and Harry is shocked to see thestrals pulling the carriages. They are a sight if you aren't prepared to see one. He can see why they have a bad reputation. Luna, being Luna, goes up and starts petting one. “They are really quite gentle,” she tells him, “People think their violent beasts because only those who've seen death can see them. But they are loving creatures. This one's name is Atticus.”

Behind them, the twins and Draco watch as Luna encourages Harry to pet him. Or, rather, thin air as they can see it. The thestrals skin is leather, but soft. He neighs softly, leaning into the touch. Harry gives him a small smile. Luna gives Atticus one more pat before entering the carriage. The rest of them follow. No one comments on the display outside.

The second clue something is wrong is when Harry hears, “Death Eater scum,” hissed at them as they pass. He doesn't turn, because that never does anything good, but neither does Draco.

When they break off to sit down, the blonde hesitates the barest of a second before heading towards his usual group. That's when Harry knows something is wrong for sure. They won't let him in. They have closed ranks and refuse to make room for him. So does the next group. And the next. Finally, head held high, he comes and sits next to Harry at the end of the table. He doesn't say anything and neither does Harry. They don't need to. It is clear enough without words.

The firsties are Sorted and the feast begins without a word from either of them. It is not until it is finished and they are in the halls does someone break the silence. “Bunch of hypocrites,” a voice behind them informs them.
Harry turns and see Zabini behind them. He can see a flash of relief in Draco's eyes before his face is once again blank. “Oh?” he asks.

“They are saying that because you stayed with Snape and Black, you are a traitor to the Cause. If they agree with the Cause of course,” he flashes them a mocking grin, “If not, you are a Death Eater because Lord Malfoy was a Death Eater. Although I'd like to see them explain why Nott, Goyle and Crabbe are still welcome.”

Draco nods.

“They are just using this as an excuse for another power play. They want a new Slytherin Prince,” Zabini rolls his eyes, “so expect trouble.”

“Obvious or covert?” Draco asks.

“Both. It depends on the intelligence level of those involved,” he says and Harry thinks of Crabbe and Goyle. Failure is not an option in Slytherin, but those two are an exception. Mainly because they don't know any better. He puts it down to bad genes.

Draco nods again and subtly braces himself before asking, “Friend or friendly warning?”

The dark boy snorts. “Friend. You know I never cared for those power games of yours. Not every Slytherin has to play The Game. My family have a neutral stance on the war and I'm not letting our Housemates drive me away from you just because of something that happened before our generation. I stick by you.”

Harry slips away quietly after that. He's not needed anymore. Draco still has a friend and he doubts either of them want him around. While Zabini was never one to give him trouble, he never did anything for him either. Not that Harry expected him to. It would have been social suicide. Especially being Draco's best mate.

A part of him is also darkly amused by his statement. 'Something that happened before our generation' indeed. Tell that to Voldemort, all the times he went after him. To them, the war may have no effect, but to Harry, it was a very real thing. He was born into it and it is only thanks to his two Professors that it is ended. He has no doubts that it would have continued, with him in the center, if not.

He has always been a child of war.

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The only certainty in this world is that everything will change.

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After the conversation with Zabini, Harry was expecting things to be tense in the common room. He was right.

The lines had clearly been drawn when he wasn't looking because everyone already had an established group. There were those that supported the Dark Lord and considered Draco a traitor. There were those that didn't and considered him Death Eater scum. There were those who were
neutral and staying out of it, mainly by ignoring everyone else.

But for all that, Harry's life didn't change much. Draco's problems were not his. He was still ignored and hated, no matter his opinion on the subject so he did what he always did. He kept his head down. He had his own problems to worry about.

One would think that the trouble would be over with Voldemort dead. But while his body is, his ideals are not. Things are changing in the Wizarding World, but those changes aren't going to happen without a fight. Blood purity is the biggest issue. Muggles are another, along with the Statute of Secrecy. It is something debated from the Ministry down to the students and children of the Wizarding UK.

It showed in different ways. Anyone with connections to the Death Eaters, be they real or imaginary, are shunned and bullied by the rest of the school and welcome into the faction in Slytherin. Muggleborns now have a higher status, when they aren't being attacked. Debates on Wizarding vs Muggle culture are common. And Harry... well.

He is either a traitor to the Cause or a failure of a Saviour. He wasn't a Supporter nor did he do his job and defeat the Dark Lord. He can't do anything right, according to them. Always the disappointment. No one was on his side. Who wanted someone so useless?

The tension bled into all parts of the school, including class. Harry found out when his cauldron blew up one day. He jerked out of the way and Severus cast a shield charm on him just in time to save his from some serious burns.

Severus is furious. Harry has rarely seen him this angry. The last time, he thought that the man was going to kill the Headmaster. He backs up to the wall, hugging his arms to himself. This isn't going to be good.

“I suppose you think you are clever?” Severus addresses the classroom at large, “You believe you can sabotage your classmate's work and get away with it. Let me assure you, you will not. Now, does anyone want to confess?” It is a question, but it sounds more like an order.

No one says anything.

“Do not believe you will get away with this if you do not speak. I know who it is. I am merely giving you a chance before I drag you off and make your life miserable for the rest of the year.”

Again, silence.

“Well then, Mr Nott, come with me,” he says, not even looking at the boy.

“Why do you care?” Nott asks.


Nott lifts his chin defiantly. “I said, why do you care about the runt? You never have before. We could do anything we wanted to him and you never said a word. Why start now? Is it because you turned traitor to the Cause?”

Harry presses his back farther against the wall, wishing it would swallow him up. This is going to end so badly. Not only is he breaking House rules, he is mouthing off. Severus is going to kill him. Slowly and painfully.

Parkinson stands up next. “Traitors to the Cause are not welcome in Slytherin. They are a disgrace to
the House and all it stands for.”

Others get to their feet and start shouting.

“All Hail the Dark Lord.”

“Down with the traitors.”

“Evil Slytherins!”

“Death Eater rubbish.”

“Go back where you belong!”

“I belong here, you don’t.”

“Down with the Dark House.”

“Down with the Blood Traitors and Mudbloods.”

“ENOUGH!” Severus thunders.

The room falls instantly silent. No matter how mad students are, no matter how bloodthirsty or loud, they are trained since first year to obey that voice. No matter the House, one learns to instantly obey Professor Severus Snape when he tells you to do something in that voice.

Harry starts to shake. No, he doesn’t start. He had been shaking before this. He started when his cauldron exploded. But now he can’t stop. It’s getting worse. No. No. Not here. Not now. Not in front of everyone. He is weak enough as it is. But his body doesn’t listen to him. His breath speeds up. He has enough mind yet to quietly dash behind Severus’ desk. All eyes are on the Professor, so no one notices him. He curls up underneath it and lets go.

When he comes back to himself, someone is stroking his hair. “It’s alright now. Everyone is gone. You’re safe. You’re safe now.” Regulus.

He makes a faint noise.

“Back with us?”

He nods, keeping his eyes closed. Bloody hell. He hates panic attacks. He hates being so weak. He thought he was over them by now. He should be. It’s been months since the cemetery. He should be over them by now. If only he wasn’t so damn weak.

“Do not even start Mr Potter,” he tells him, correctly guessing where his thoughts are, “I have told you enough times, panic attacks do not make you weak. They are the body’s way of handling stress when it gets to be too much.”

Harry nods to show he heard him. He still has trouble believing it though. Finally he sits up, but Regulus puts a hand on his shoulder, forcing him to lean against him. “Not too fast now. Remember what happened last time?”

Oh yes, he remembers. He feels his cheeks heating up at the thought. “What happen?”

“Severus is going to make sure they regret being born. He called Minerva for backup and left them all under the lioness’ tender care while he went to the Headmaster. The three of them are sorting it out as we speak.”
“Are they still living?” he asks, completely serious.

“Yes, although I imagine some are wishing for death right about now.” He sighs, “Whatever were they thinking? Revolt in class? Not a sound strategy at all. Severus is going to have a ball, comparing them to Gryffindors.”

That startles a laugh out of him. Yes, he can hear it now.

“Now come,” he keeps his arm around Harry, supporting him. Regulus does not lead him back to the dorm, but their private chambers. His Professor herds him into a room and straight into bed. “Sleep now,” he commands softly.

Harry closes his eyes and does just that. Too bad it isn't a peaceful one.

Lay down, below the surface, underneath it all. It is peaceful down there. No one get you.

Harry wakes with a start, not knowing where he is. He frantically reaches for his glasses. Placing them on his face, he doesn't recognize the room. But then memory returns and he remembers Regulus tucking him in. A faint blush appears on his face, but fortunately, no one is around to see it.

He takes a moment to look around the room. It is in the same light color scheme as his bedroom at Grimmauld Place, although smaller. Still, it's bigger than his room at the Dursleys. It's nice. It calms him. A familiar sight, even if he has never seen this room before. He gets out of bed reluctantly and makes it, smoothing the sheets down.

Walking out the door, he sees the living room where Severus and Regulus are sitting on the couch together. They both look up when he enters.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” Severus greets dryly.

“Feeling better?” Regulus asks.

He nods.

“Good, it is time to eat then. You can hardly afford to miss a meal.”

Harry nods again, hoping the faint blush isn't visible. He is still so small, even after the care he was given this summer. There is a strong chance he is always going to be small. He hates it. Everyone always feels the need to comment on it, whether they mean well or not. And they generally don't.

He takes a seat at the table and his two Professors join him. Together they eat in relative silence. He doesn't feel much like talking. His dream plagues him still. His skin crawls at the mere thought of it. He knows he should tell either of the two men about them, but he can't. He can't bring himself to discuss just what his nightmares have turned into. He can barely bear to remember them himself, let alone verbalize them. If he had a choice, he would take his old nightmares back in an instant. Anything is better than this, even his parent's murder.

“You will be staying here tonight,” Severus tells him abruptly.
He looks up, surprised.

“Your Housemates will not be in any condition to realize you are missing and I'd rather not have you out of my sight after today. While the initial problem is fixed, there is still repair to be done.”

“Yes Sir,” he says softly.

Severus sighs. “Potter, what have I told you about setbacks?”

“They are inevitable and not a sign of failure. No one is perfect. These things take time. Even you have had panic attacks,” he intones dutifully.

“Very good,” he nods in approval. “Draco will be joining us shortly,” he then continues, “For the time being, you both will be living in your rooms here.”

“That room is mine?” he asks without thinking about it.

Severus snorts. “No Potter, it is the Headmaster's, for when he comes down for tea and biscuits.”

“I don't think it's bright enough for the Headmaster. And the colors match,” he comments, looking up through his eyelashes as he does.

Regulus laughs and Severus rolls his eyes. Neither are upset. Good. He still isn't sure about joking about these things. He doesn't want to cross a line. It never ends well. He flexes his back in memory. No, they do not.

Severus catches the movement. Of course he does. “Nightmares?” he asks.

Harry nods.

Severus waits for him to continue, but he doesn't. He really doesn't want to talk about it.

The man clears his thought.

“It's about Voldemort,” he admits truthfully, but not wholly. Surprisingly Severus doesn't push. Maybe he was expecting that answer. The monster does appear enough in them. Just not like this.

“I want to know if they continue,” he informs him.

Good. He has time. “Yes Severus,” he says and he even remembered to use his name this time and not 'Sir' or 'Professor'. That is another problem of his. Regulus requested that he use their first names. Not in class of course, but in private. But he has a hard time remembering. And he is not exactly comfortable with it either. Part of him is still wondering when they will get tired of him and abandon him. He is more surprised that it hasn't happen yet, to be honest. What about him is worth keeping around?

Draco walks in shortly after this. “Harry,” he greets and makes no mention of his earlier break down. Maybe no one knows about it. Very good. Severus may insist he is not weak for having them, but he is under no illusion that his Housemates will agree.

“Malfoy,” he replies.

“You're lucky you missed it earlier. I knew Uncle Severus could be scary, but Professor McGonagall? And the Headmaster. Bloody hell, I think a couple of kids pissed their pants.”

“Draco.”
“Sorry Uncle Severus. But they did. Who knew the old coot had it in him?”

“Draco .”

“You can’t blame the boy for that one,” Regulus says, “he definitely picked it up from you.”

“That does not mean he is allowed to repeat it,” Severus says, not even bothering to deny it.

“Whatever you say love,” is the dry reply.

Harry covers a small smile. This. This right here is why he can’t let the idea of soulmates go. He longs for what his two Professors have. He wants someone who he can snark at without fear. Someone who will accept him and talk to him and support him. He wants someone to look at him like his two Professors look at each other. Love. All he has always wanted is for someone to love him. And with the two men in front of him, he can see how brilliant it can be.

If only that was for him as well. But he is destined to walk alone.

He gets up from his chair. “Good night,” he tells the room at large. Time to leave before his heart gets anymore stupid ideas.

...

The fears and doubts that plague that day are the nightmares that plague the night.

...

“So how is it,"

“Living with the Ultimate Slytherin,”

“And his scary mate,”

“During the school year?”

“Not much different from during the summer honestly. There is the pressure of getting my homework done, but that's never been a problem. After that it's anyone's guess what happens next – read, talk, stare at the fire,” he shrugs, “Severus is teaching me wizarding chess.”

“That's still weird mate,"

“Hearing you call the Dungeon Bat,”

“By his first name.”

Harry lets the name go because he knows the twins don't mean it. Not really. They figured out fairly quickly he doesn't like it when either Severus or Regulus are insulted, despite not knowing how he feels about the men.

“You're lucky,”

“Things are so tense up here,”
“You can cut it with a knife,"
“A dull one.”

“None of the Professors are very happy right now,”
“They’ll bite anyone's head off anymore.”

“More kids have burst out into tears this week,"
“Than the last decade.”

“And it isn't even the Slytherin that are responsible,”
“It is everyone else.”

“Professor McGonagall is one of the worse.”

“Professor Flitwick is brutal,”

“Who knew he had it in him,”

“We can't even get him to laugh anymore,”

“And he secretly loves us.”

“He even snapped at Luna the other day.”

“That is, until he found out why she was wondering the halls,”

“Looking for her robes,”

“And then the Ravenclaws faced the fury of a Dueling Champion.”

“The Nargles won't be troubling her anymore for a while.”

“Now if only he could get rid of Jackalburs that easily,” Harry mutters.

“Still having trouble little brother?”

“Just the usual.”

They give him a look. “Alright, so a little more. But it's nothing I can't handle.”
George snorts. “Please remember, brother dear,”

“We still remember when you thought you could handle a basilisk by yourself,”

“That argument will get you nowhere.”

“I was fine,” he protests.

“A basilisk bit you ,”

“If it wasn't for Fawkes, you would be dead.”

“Try again.”
He sighs, knowing they won't let it go. “It's... Draco,” he admits, fiddling with his bracelets. 

“Is that little brat giving you trouble?”

“No. He's been nothing but nice since the summer. Well,” he pauses, “Alright, so that's not exactly true. He's no angel. But he's been decent at least. And he always makes a point to talk to me now.”

The twins exchange a look. “And you want to know why?”

He nods. “It's... probably not a prank, but...” he trails off.

“But it took you three years to trust us and sometimes it is still a work in progress,” Fred finishes.

He doesn’t deny it.

“Do you know why the change of heart?”

“I suspect it has to do with that conversation I told you about. And, well,” he takes a deep breath and removes one of his bracelets. He has never told the twins what his names were. They never brought up soulmates or rivals.

“Oh,” they say as one.

He nods.

“And you're sure it's Malfoy?”

He shows them his other wrist. “Both Severus and Regulus insist it is not Voldemort.”

“And Malfoy's wrist?”

“Only my name.”

They nod.

“He knows?”

“Yeah, I told him.”

“And you can't decide what to do next.”

“I'm so tired,” he admits softly.

In an instant, he is surrounded by Gryffindor as they hug him tightly. He takes comfort in their warmth. They are the only ones who really touch him besides Regulus and rarely Luna and Severus. He isn't comfortable with anyone else. Touch means pain. That is the way it has always been. Nothing good came from touch, be it in the Muggle world or Wizarding. But now, that isn't always true. He relishes the difference when he can.

“You are strong little brother,”

“You can do it.”

“And if you ever need anyone to carry you,”

“We will,” they reassure him.
“Thanks,” he whispers so softly he isn’t sure they can hear him.

But of course they do. “Anything for you little brother.”

Always keep someone around you trust, to lean on when you need to. A true friend will carry you when you can't move by yourself.

Harry looks away as a newly resurrected Voldemort steps out from the cauldron. A shiver runs up his spine. This is it. This is where he dies. Finally. Finally he is going to die. It is going to be over. The pain is going to end. Yes.

Voldemort turns and looks at him, eyes crimson red, skin pale and stark white, hair gone and nose missing. He has the image of evil Dark Lord down perfectly. Death Eaters arrive all around him, their white masks stand out in the shadows of the cloudy day.

He turns towards them. “Show me your faces, my faithful,” he commands.

As one, they remove their masks. He looks at their faces, not wanting to look at the monster in front of him. Just because he wants to die, doesn't mean he has to stare it in the face. Death will come no matter where he is looking. But then he sees two familiar faces and his breath catches. No.

Both Severus and Regulus look at him and sneer, faces twisted with hate and disgust.

No.

“I see you have realized your Professors true alliance,” Voldemort hisses at him, “devastating, isn't it, to be betrayed by those we trust?”

Harry struggles in his bonds, but it is no use. No, it can't be. They promised to be there for him.

“Yes, it is terrible. But that is what you get, for believing someone could actually care for you.”

No. No, they promised... they promised to be his family.


His hand moves down his face, past his throat and chest, pausing at his nipples, straight to his trousers. He rubs the front of them roughly.

“No,” Harry gasps at the unwelcome feeling.

“No? Well that won't do.” He strips his clothes off of him, vanishing them with a wave of his wand. He is exposed.

Voldemort takes his soft cock in his hand and begins to massage it. It hardens. Harry whimpers, both
in pleasure and in fear. At least with Riddle, he was gentle. Caring, almost. Now, with Voldemort, it is only possessiveness with none of the gentleness.

But then the hand strays down his cock, past his bollocks, to his entrance. “It is a pity that my younger self never got the chance to appreciate this delicious part of you. But we can remedy that, can't we?” He pushes a finger in.

Harry begins screaming. “No! No, don't touch me! Don't touch me you monster!” He thrashes uselessly against the ropes.

“Monster? Is that any reason to talk to your soulmate?” He adds another finger.

“No!” he screams and bolts out of the bed, straight to the loo where he sicks up violently. He is trembling so badly that he can barely hold onto the rim. He can't get the memory of the touch to go away. He wants to wash it off, desperately, but he knows he can't stand up right now. He gives another violent, dry heave.

And then there are hands holding him up, but he jerks away. “Don't touch me,” he says as he curls into a shaking ball, “Don't touch me!”

“Shh, it's alright, it's alright. No one is going to touch you. No one is going to hurt you. We will protect you.”

He looks up into the worried eyes of Regulus. A face full of hate flashes through his mind and he looks away, flinching. “No,” he whimpers, “no.”

He misses the look his two Professors exchange before Severus tries. “Come on brat, come back to us. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

Harry curls into himself farther.

“Merlin balls, Harry, what is it?” Draco. His mind latches onto the name. Draco. Draco is his soulmate, not Voldemort. Not Tom Riddle. Draco Malfoy. That is the only thing he can think right now. Unthinkingly, he launches himself at the blonde and holds on tightly.

He feels the blonde start, but wraps his arms around him. Harry buries his face in his neck. “He tried again,” he whispers.

“What?” he can tell, barely, that Draco is confused, “Who tried what again? What is going on?”

“Get him to the couch Draco,” someone orders.

“Alright, come on Harry. It'll be more comfortable on the couch,” he moves.

“Don't leave me,” he begs.

“I'm not, You're coming with me.”

It takes some time, but eventually Draco sits on the couch. Harry is instantly at his side, curled in as close as possible. “Here, drink this,” something is pressed to his lips and he drinks. It takes a few moments, but he can feel the blinding panic recede. Calming draught. He can think again. But not enough to let go of Draco. Just enough to wonder why in Merlin's name he thinks Draco is safer than Severus or Regulus, nightmare or no.

“With us again brat?” and speaking of Severus.
He nods.

“Excellent. Do you believe you can release Mr Malfoy now?”

He shakes his head.

“Not even if he will be a part of this conversation if you do not?”

Again he shakes his head.

“A verbal answer is required.”

“I... I can’t,” he admits quietly.

“And why is that?”

“Soulmate, safe,” he shrugs, not caring if it doesn't make sense, not even to himself.

But all Severus does is sigh. “Dare I ask what nightmare brought *that* response on?”

Harry doesn't answer.

“That was not a request.”

“Voldemort.”

“That is not sufficient. None of your other nightmares resulted in you believing Draco was your soulmate, Voldemort or no. In fact, I recall having to reassure you of the opposite. Why now?”

“He keeps trying to...” he can't. He can't possible tell them.

“Shall I guess what he is trying to do?” Severus asks, but it is in a dry tone, as if he knows the answer and is waiting to see if you will say it instead.

He shudders.

“I do believe that is enough to give anyone nightmares,” he agrees.

“Uncle Sev?” Draco asks and it is a sign of how serious things are that Severus doesn't correct him, “*what is going on ?*”

“It appears that Mr Potter's mind has decided to conjure a new horror for him to witness in his sleep. One that I would not wish on anyone, not even a Gryffindor.”

“Uncle Sev...”

“He keeps saying I am his. He takes care of what is his,” he finally tells them.

Severus sighs. “Child, you will be the death of me.”

In a flash, Harry moves from Draco to his Professor, clinging tightly. At first Severus is stiff, but slowly he relaxes enough to return the desperate hug. “Do not expect this to become a habit,” he warns.

“Yes Sir,” he answers, not moving.

“Death,” he repeats.
“Please tell me Harry did not mean what I think he did,” Draco begs.

He is ignored. “Has he penetrated at any point?”

“This time. Finger.”

Severus' grip tightens. “And the others?”

“Hand jobs mostly, if he got that far. Kissing. Licking. Biting. Riddle was... nice. Voldemort wasn't.” He has to force the words out. It is almost physically painful to do so. This is the last thing he wants to do, but he knows he has no choice. And Severus won't judge him. He never has.

“Riddle was...” he pauses, “I liked it,” he starts again, “I... I...” he can't get the words out and begins to sob instead. The man doesn't say anything.

Unless this is the breaking point, that is.

Then, “A natural reaction. Just a natural reaction. The mind does not have to consent for the body to react.”

Draco makes a strangled sound. He didn't think the boy could hear, but he must have caught that last bit. He sounds horrified. Merlin, he is disgusting.

“Come Draco,” Regulus tells him, “Time for a potion yourself.”

Regulus leads the blonde out of the room. They are alone.

“I take it this is a reoccurring nightmare?”

“Yes Sir.”

“And I do not need to ask why you did not inform me of such.”

He shakes his head.

“Is rape recovery now going to be a needed topic to cover?”

Harry flinches at the word, but shrugs. “The nightmares... are bad. But I don't feel... violated most of the time. I don't avoid other people or fear being touched. Sex...” he trails off, blushing.

“Yes?”

“I'm not sure. That may be a problem, but that's not a... priority of mine right now.”

Severus snorts. “I am glad we do not have two teenage boys driven by hormones at least. Now, do you believe you can detach yourself from me?”

“Sorry Sir.”

“That was not the question.”

He hides his head in Severus' shoulder.

“Oh brat of mine,” he mutters, “what a life you lead.” He runs a hand through Harry's hair, just the way he likes it.

“Sorry,” he repeats.
“Go to sleep,” he says sternly, “One of us has classes tomorrow.”

He flinches. His Professor should not have to put up with this. He is being nothing but a burden right now. He needs to stop being a baby and suck it up. So what if he has nightmares? Big deal. It never was before. The only thing he had to do was be quiet. He shouldn't wake decent people up with his problems. Pathetic. Why would they want him? Nothing but a useless burden. A worthless Freak. Who would want him?

“As if I have not run on less. Sleep .”

Harry does.

The nightmares do not return.

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No light in your bright eyes. They are dead from the inside out. My, but isn't life dangerous?
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Draco is careful around him after that. It as if, now that he knows about Harry's nightmares, he thinks he will break at a touch. It is infuriating. He is not a fragile doll, no matter how fucked up his nightmares are.

Well, he is careful around him until he throws a book at his head. Then he gets the message.

And a lump when he didn't duck in time.
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.
.

Rage on against the dying light.
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The year passes. Tensions eventually ease some, much to everyone's relief. Actually, that might be why it eases. Everyone is tired of it. Not to say it vanishes completely, but it decrease to a more tolerable level. Curses may be fired, but blood will not be spilled.

So, an average day at Hogwarts.

Draco continues to stay close to Harry. It has only gotten worse since that night. After the book incident, he isn't overbearing about it. He never even brings it up. But he is still close. Still there.

He still doesn't know what it means. It is as if he wants to prove himself. But why? Why would he want to prove himself to a Freak like Harry? It makes no sense. He can't honestly believe they are soulmates. He has spent the past four years convinced otherwise. What happen to make him change his mind?
Why?

But he studies with him and forces him to go flying with him. He offers protection in the common room. And Merlin, didn't that cause a stir. He still isn't back to being the Ice Prince of Slytherin, but after a few of their Housemates were suspended and some upper Housemates were expelled, his status is much higher now. No one is stupid enough to try and attack him after the first time. The sixth year was in the Hospital wing for a week.

Christmas is spent at Hogwarts again, as neither Severus nor Regulus trust the current behavior to continue with their absence. Harry doesn't mind. He has spent all of his Christmases here at school. At least this year, he will have someone to spend it with. If they want him, that is. He knows this is a family holiday. And he isn't a part of the family. Not really.

When Severus realizes his doubts, his ears ring for hours afterwards. That man and his lectures. Vicious.

So are the sessions after he finds out about the newest nightmares. He shudders just to think about them. Brutal. But they are decreasing now, fortunately. Other, usual, nightmares are starting again and Harry has never felt more relief to see his Mum murdered than he did that first night. Merlin does he have issues.

Christmas day is spent with Draco, Regulus and Severus in the morning and the twins and Luna during the evening. The plan was to have supper at the Burrow, but that was beyond awkward. The rest of the Weasleys still don't know what to make of him.

So the twins whisk him away to Luna's house, since she lives close by. Harry meets her Father and finds out where Luna gets it from. Xenophilius Lovegood is a very... interesting man.

But then things come to a head, one day not long afterwards. The two of them are wandering the halls together. Or, more like, Harry is wandering the halls and Draco decided to come with him. Why? Who the bloody hell knows. He doesn't and e is sick of it. He turns and demands “Why?”


“This,” he gestures between them with his hand, “All of this. You spent years making my life hell. And now all of a sudden you are being nice to me. Why?!”

Draco looks at him and then sighs. “Because I realized what a self entitled brat I was.”

Harry crosses his arms. “And?”

“And I wanted to make it up to you.”

“And?”

“And I figured this was the best way. You take actions over words better.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“I want your real reason. Not some made up rubbish.”

“That is my real reason,” Draco says, indignant.

“Really? It has nothing to do with the names on my wrist?”
He blushed.

Harry nods. That's what he thought. “And?” he asks again.

“And I've always liked you. I know-” he says when Harry goes to interrupts, “Believe me, I know how messed up that is. I know that is completely the wrong response. But I was eleven and spoiled and hurt. I spent my entire life hearing stories about the Boy-Who-Lived and how he saved us all. He was the hero of the Wizarding World. And I had his name on my wrist. Father wasn't happy about it. He was convinced I was your enemy, not your soulmate. But I hoped I was,” he sighs.

“But then I met you and everything went wrong. You weren't what I was expecting. And Father... well, needless to say he wasn't happy with me when I tried to show you friendship. Plus I was insanely jealous of you. I know, I know,” he waves off Harry's nonexistent protests, “it isn't an excuse. You're right. It isn't. But we all have to grow up some time. And I decided to make it up to you. Maybe convince you to give me a chance. No matter how long it takes. And believe me,” he looks at Harry dead in the eye, “I know just how long it can take. The twins talked to me.”

Harry stares at him, taking it all in. Well he has one thing right, winning his trust is a vicious battle that takes years to win. And he does have an explanation without hiding behind it as an excuse. He isn't acting entitled about it either. Wonder upon wonders, Draco Malfoy is growing up.

But that doesn't answer everything. “Why?” he asks again.

“What this time?”

He rolls his eyes. “Why do you want me? And don't say because we are soulmates. For one thing you don't know for sure. And for another, that is a rubbish reason.”

“Because I like you,” he says simply.

Harry laughs a bitter laugh. “You like me? Merlin, what are you on? It must be something good.”

Draco blinks and then sighs. “I do. I think you are smart and sarcastic. You are picking up Severus' dry sense of humor. Or maybe you already had it and it is just now coming out. I think you are funny and loyal. You're damn stubborn, but that's part of your charm. And you are beautiful.”

Harry snorts. “I could almost believe you, until that last one. Beautiful? Are you sure you aren't the one who needs glasses?”

“You are,” he insists.

“You know nothing has changed since I first told you my names last summer. I am still the Freak. I always will be. There is nothing worthwhile about me and there never will be. No one wants a Freak, not for long.”

“What about the twins?”

“They are too stubborn for their own good.”

“Lovegood?”

He shrugs. “Luna is Luna. Nothing she does makes any sense.”

“Uncle Severus and Uncle Regulus?”

He sighs. “I'm still waiting for them to figure that out.”
“And you don’t trust me at all.”

“Don’t take it personally, I don’t trust anyone.”

Draco’s expression turns mulish. “Come with me,” he says.

Harry considers not following, but Draco grabs his wrist before he does. At that point it is easier to go along with him. What’s the worse that can happen? Well, many things technically, but Harry isn’t overly worried about those. This is either going to be the end of the prank or the beginning of something. He just isn’t sure which.

He leads him to a portrait and says, “Apple trees.” It swings open. Inside is the Prefects loo. “Blaise gave me the password,” he says.

Harry nods. Zabini was their new Prefect after the mess at the beginning of the year. “Why are we here?”

“I thought that would be obvious. We are here to take a bath.” He turns and readies the water.

A bath?! What the hell? What makes Draco think this is a good idea? What is he trying to prove?

“Strip,” he commands.

Harry crosses his arms. “No.”

Draco sighs as if this is a trial to endure. “You don’t believe me when I say I think you are beautiful. So I am going to prove it. But I need you naked.”

“And I suppose you are just going to stand there?”

Draco takes off his shirt in response. Harry takes a moment to appreciate the view. A pale chest, lean muscles, flawless skin. Clearly Draco is the beautiful one here. He walks over and places his hands on Harry’s shoulders. “I want to bathe you,” he says softly, “I want the chance to show you what you are worth. I am not trying to mock you. I am not trying anything sexual. I want to show you I am serious. Will you let me?”

Harry should say no. He really should. This is only going to end in misery. There is nothing valuable about him. Nor is there anything beautiful. He is covered in scars.

“Please?” he asks and that is what does it. He has never heard Draco use that word before.

He nods.

Draco carefully unbuttons his shirt, letting it drop when he is done. He then takes off his own trousers so he is standing there naked. Yes, Draco is most definitely the beautiful one here. Next he unbuttons Harry’s trousers and looks at Harry again. He nods his permission and Draco slides his trouser and pants down in one go.

When he is standing there, fully naked, Draco takes a long look. He brushes a hand along his ribs, along the dragon fire burns, almost reverently. “Gorgeous,” he breathes.

Harry has to fight not to roll his eyes.

Draco leads him into the tub and sits behind him. He takes a soft flannel and begins to wash Harry, still with that same reverent touch. “You are even more beautiful than I imagined.”
“I am covered in scars.”

“You bear badges of survival.”

He snorts.

“You do. They show strength, No one has been able to kill you yet. They knock you down and you will get right back up. Amazing,” he kisses his shoulder.

Harry has to admit this feels good. No, more than good. To echo Draco, this feels amazing. No one has ever paid this much attention to his body before. It feels as if Draco is practically worshiping him. He continues to place soft kisses on his back and shoulders. He runs the flannel thoroughly over each part of his body.

He can’t help the groan that escapes his throat. He blushing.

“It’s fine,” Draco tells him, “I’m glad to know I am doing a good job. But remember, I will not do anything without permission. Anything.”

Harry nods his understanding. But by the time Draco has moved and is finishing the front of him, he is hard and breathing heavily. He has never been so turned on outside one of those damn nightmares of his.

“Do you want me to do something about it?” he asks seriously.

“Please,” he answers desperately.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he hisses.

Draco nods and moves closer. “May I kiss you?”

Harry nods.

Draco does. It is a firm kiss. Not too gentle, but not too controlling either. Their noses bump and Draco tilts his head to the side more. He bites Harry’s lower lip softly and Harry gasps. Merlin does this feel good. Better than any dream, that is for sure.

But then Draco lowers his hand and begins to stroke his shaft. His mind flashes to Riddle doing the same thing, in this same position. Harry jerks back.

Draco backs off instantly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he shakes his head.

“No,” he says firmly, “don’t you dare lie to me. Not about this. Tell me the truth,” he demands.

“It’s nothing,” he insists, “just a flashback from those Merlin cursed nightmares.”

Draco nods. “And what set it off?”

“Our position combined with your hand.”

He looks thoughtful. “So hand jobs are a problem?”
“No. You just took me by surprise. I don't want to stop.”

“Are you sure?”

“I won't let him win.”

Draco nods again. “Alright, up on the ledge,” he says, “time for a new position.”

Harry obeys and Draco kneels in front of him. No, he can’t be doing what Harry thinks he is doing. “What-” he starts to ask, but is cut off when Draco takes his head into his mouth and gently sucks.

“Merlin,” Harry curses.

Draco spends a few minutes laving attention just on the head before lowering his mouth farther. Harry curses again at the wet heat surrounding him. This is certainly a new experience. No danger of a flashback now. Draco's nose touches his pubic hair and his cock is in Draco's throat. His hands latch onto the blonde's hair, although he is careful not to pull.

It feels so good. His throat flutters around him before he pulls back up for air. Then he goes down again. He runs his tongue along the sensitive vein and Harry's hips jerk. Draco coughs and pulls up.

“Sorry,” he gasps, “shit, so bloody good, sorry.”

Draco removes his mouth completely and moves down to his bollocks. He licks across them before taking one in his mouth. Harry gives another involuntary jerk. He moves off and starts on the other. Once he thinks they have had enough attention, he goes back to his cock, licking it before swallowing it again. He takes a few seconds to adjust and then deep throats it again.

He continues this pattern until Harry is a babbling mess. Draco gives him just enough pressure to come close, but never enough to bring him over the edge.

“Please, please Dra- oh! Yessssss, yessss, oh plea- I wan, oh, I need to, damn, shit, oh!” he begs incoherently. Then Draco deep throats him one last time and hums. It is enough. Harry thrusts his hips violently and comes down Draco's throat. He swallows it all. Somehow. That has to be a skill by itself right there.

Both of them are panting when he pulls off. He rests his head of Harry's thigh. Harry gently pets his head while they catch their breath. “Good?” he asks, voice hoarse.


“No, I'm good,” he reassures him.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Bloody hell.

“Believe me now?”

“Ask me again when my brain isn't mush.”

“I could be waiting for eternity then,” he teases.
“Prat,” Harry answers.

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Scars show us where we have been. They don't tell us where we are going.

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“Allow me the chance to be the soulmate you deserve. The one I know you deserve because I know you think you don't deserve anything. But you're wrong. You do deserve it. You deserve this and so much more. I'm not asking for an eternal promise or anything. I know this is going to take work and effort. But I think it is worth it. So please, will you give me that chance?”

Harry does.

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Though hope is frail, it's hard to kill.

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The rest of the year after break goes by quickly. After Harry agreed to give Draco a chance, he was around even more. He learned to get along with the twins and formed a surprisingly close friendship with Luna. They weren't necessarily in a relationship. Not a romantic one at least. There wasn't any of the usual couple things, like hand holding or kissing. But Draco was trying and that's what mattered.

Not that it was easy, but neither of them were expecting that. It is a start, that's all. Just a start, but what a big step that represents.

And then the Headmaster calls Harry into his office and unbalanced everything again.

“Hello Headmaster,” he greets cautiously. He has not spoken to the man since that last disastrous conversation last year. Fawkes trills his own greeting and he smiles at the phoenix.

“Hello my boy, come in, come in. Lemon drop?”

And he is still calling him 'my boy'. Honestly why? It isn't reassuring, it is creepy. He is not the Headmaster's boy. Didn't they already establish that? Or was that in his head? “No thank you Sir.”

“Very well then, although I do believe you don't know what you are missing. How has your school year been treating you?”

“Fine Sir.”

“No problems?”

“No.” Or none that he would ever come to the Headmaster about.
“Good, good. I'm so glad to hear it my boy. Now about why I called you in here today. I am concerned about your summer plans.”

“Sir?”

“You do realize you have to return to the Dursleys, correct?”

What?

“They are your legal guardians. Last summer I can admit it wouldn't have been wise to spend you back. But now that you are doing better, I am afraid I must insist.”

Harry starts to shake. He can already feel another panic attack coming on by the second. Return to the Dursleys? Now, after a year away from them? No. No, he can't. He won't survive. He won't. Fawkes flies over to his shoulder, but it doesn't make a difference. He can't go back. He can't.

But what does make a difference is Regulus and Severus entering the office, both looking furious. They take one look at Harry and turn towards the Headmaster.

“What is the meaning of this?” Regulus growls.

Severus pulls him to his side, running a hand through his hair. Harry leans into the touch, but it isn't enough. Not this time. Not right now.

“I simply informed him that he has to return to the Dursleys. They are his legal guardians after all. However, if he were to find new guardians, then he would be welcome to stay with them,” he tells them, eyes twinkling.

“Damn you Albus and your manipulations,” Severus snarls, “Does this look like a good idea to you?”

Fawkes trills.

“Even the damn fried chicken agrees with me!”

“Those are the rules, my boy.”

“Don't you dare 'my boy' me Headmaster. Not after all you have done. It is your fault he was placed there to begin with.”

“And it kept him safe.”

Severus snorts. “From those outside the house. But tell me, what protected him from those within? Nothing, that's what. And you want to send him back?” His grip is bruising, but Harry doesn't mind. It helps keep him centered.

“I'll do it,” he says.

“What?”

“I accept the adoption.”

“No.”

His heart sinks. Oh, he should have realized they would change their minds after all. Stupid stupid, stup-
"I refuse to let you make that decision because the old coot decided to meddle again. This is not a choice to be made lightly. Which is why we are giving him time to think about it."

"Surely the boy has had enough time already. It has been a year."

"What part of trust issues do you not understand old man? Rome wasn't built in a year and nor was trust regained. Time. These things take time."

"I am sorry my boy, but a decision must be made before he leaves for the summer. It cannot be put off any longer."

"I'll do it," he repeats again. Anything is better than the Dursleys.

"Are you sure?" Regulus asks, "We may be forced into this," and here he glares at the Headmaster, "but we can become your legal guardians instead."

He shakes his head.

"Adoption cannot be undone. We can do the paperwork for the guardianship now and the adoption later, if you want it still."

"No, adoption," he insists.

"And why is that?"

"Legal guardians can be undone. If we do that, you can be taken away. I don't want to lose you."

"And who would take us away?"

He points at the Headmaster. "Him. He keeps trying to control me and he might change his mind and take you away from me. But if you adopt me, he can't. He can't undo it. You'll be my parents. Mine."

He looks over at the Headmaster. His facial expression will be one he will remember forever. Too bad he feels no pity for him. The old wizard has brought it onto himself.

Expect the unexpected, especially when meddlers get involved.

And that is how Harry James Potter became Harry James Regulus Potter-Black-Snape. It is a mouthful, but traditional. Or that's what he's told when he complains about it. The best part about the ceremony is the extra height he gained from the blood adoption potion.

The school was shocked when the announcement was made, but Harry didn't care. He still had his doubts of course, but he stuck by what he thought. Anything was better than the Dursleys. When it came to Regulus and Severus that it. He is aware things could be much, much worse.

The twins graduated with a bang of course. None of the Professors were very impressed, the Headmaster least of all. Harry appreciated the gesture. None of his friends were happy with the way
the wizard handled the adoption. They promised to show him their new shop once they bought it. They already had the building picked out.

Luna was going with her Father to Sweden to look for the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. He wished her luck. She promised to bring one back for him.

Draco was yet again spending the summer with them. Narcissa was still in France. It was doubtful she would ever come back at this point.

And Harry, well.

“Come on brat, let's go home.”

Harry was beginning to hope.

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Always remember, and never forget, it is always darkest before the dawn.
Year 5 (epilogue 2 part 1)

Chapter Summary

In which things continue. They may actually be improving. Maybe. Harry thinks they are, but as he knows, these things can always change.

Chapter Notes

Remember when I said that I wasn't going to write anymore of this story? Yeah, well, I lied apparently. I did (obviously) and oh boy did I ever. So I had never been completely happy with the epilogue that I wrote, especially once Harry got to Hogwarts, but I let it go. Not anymore. I planned on going to go back and rewrite a quick thing, the way I orginially thought it should be, with some small twitches here and there. Small. Ha! Try 72k words. That's right, you guys now have 72k words of soul tearing angst to go through. (Or at least I assume it is. Like last time, I've worked with this so much, I can no longer tell.)

This is NOT a Year 6. This is an alternate Year 5, truer to my original outline. Please don't ask for more after this, I truly have no idea where I would go. (Plus this is not the project I should be working on anyways. Feel special, please.)

For anyone who has read my 1st epilogue, the first section is the same. Then things get slowly different until Harry gets to Hogwarts. Then things completely change pretty much.

Enjoy.

Harry sits on his bed, fiddling with the bracelets Draco gave him for his birthday. He had put them on once the boy was gone and hasn't taken them off since. The bottom is soft against the skin of his wrist. The top is warm where he traces his finger over the pattern, again and again. Now, instead of tracing the names on his wrist, he traces the designs on the band.

And it is fitting that he does so, for it is the boy who he is thinking about now. Draco Malfoy. He has changed, since his birthday, a week ago. Or he appears to have changed. There has been a shift in their relationship and Harry cannot understand what it is. Draco has been... nicer to Harry. He had stopped mocking him before, but now it goes farther than that. Now he smiles and talks to him. Tentatively. As if he is unsure he is doing the right thing.

But why would he wonder that? Why would he care? He never did before. He took delight in making Harry's life as miserable as he could. Ever since that first declaration in first year, he has gone out of his way to make it clear he hates him. Now he is doing the opposite. Now it seems as if he is trying to show he cares.

He doesn't know what Draco wants. That is the real problem. He could deal with the change in attitude, if only he knew what Draco wanted. If he had more faith in people, maybe he would believe Draco is trying to make it up to him. To apologize, through actions, for the past four years. But Harry doesn't have that faith. Nor is he is Gryffindor. He is a Slytherin. He knows better.
Everything has a price.

So while, yes, he understands that Draco is making an overturn at something, he doesn't know what exactly it is. Nor does he know why. He knows he has to think, but about what?

It's maddening. All of a sudden, he can't get the blonde out of his head. He thought he was past this. Thought he no longer cared about soulmates. They only bring pain. People can talk all they want about how great they are. For Harry, that is never true.

And he doesn't care. He doesn't. What is the point? A monster or the boy who hates him. It is never going to turn out well, so why would he care? Life has brought him enough pain, without this. He is better off alone. He does not care about his soulmate. He has no reason to.

And yet...

He pulls his hair in frustration. And yet the hope refuses to die completely. It's still there. It may be small, a fragile thread in a strong wind, but it still exists. It's still there. It lies right next to the sassy part of his mind that he always buries. It is just as helpful to him as his hope.

Maybe that's part of the problem. Both Regulus and Severus have been encouraging that part of his mind to come out more. Not that Severus ever encourages disrespect or cheek. But he has a habit of smirking whenever Harry says something particularly sarcastic. Regulus assures him that he finds it entertaining, even if he'll never admit it. It shows spirit.

It shows he is not broken. He can carry on. It is the Slytherin way, to thumb his nose at the rest of the world when they try to keep him down. When they try to tear him apart simply for existing. He will not yield. He will not hide. He will not surrender.

He is a survivor.

Every day he goes on, he is a survivor. Every time he smiles. Every time he laughs. Each time he relies on a friend instead of going on alone. It shows he can go on. That they haven't broken him yet. That he is stronger than they are. He can take what they throw at him. They will never win.

At least that's what he's told. Some days he doesn't believe them. Some days it feels as if the world has won. What does he have after all? Massive trust issues, depression, nightmares, ptsd, and a mass of scars. That's not anything to be proud of. It's a list of failures, not accomplishments. So what if he is still here? He doesn't want to be, not really. Not most of the time.

But still he carries on. Not gracefully, but he does. Luna tells him the Jackalburs haven't won yet. He wishes there was a potion to get rid of them all at once time. He had asked Severus, once, if there was. All the man did was laugh. A bitter laugh, but a laugh nonetheless. He took it as a 'no'.

All this trouble over two stupid names. Who even decided what they meant anyways? Maybe they aren't the names of your soulmate and your rival. Maybe they are just the names of the two people you will interact with the most. Or maybe they are the two who will make the biggest impact on your life. The latter is certainly true for him. No one can explain how the names work. They put it down to magic and call it a day.

That doesn't sit well with Harry. He doesn't have any faith in destiny and no trust in fate. Both have screwed him over far too many times for him to. He doesn't believe in a faceless, nameless being who decides how life is run. He believes in things he can touch. The unseen is never for him. It's one of the reasons he hates Divination so much. Besides the fact he is convinced the Professor is out to get him. Why else would she predict his death so much?
Magic is not some unexplained, mysterious phenomenon. It has rules and regulations, just like everything else. It has its limits as well. So to explain something away by magic does not work. Magic can be explained. Not to do so is both stupid and ignorant.

Nor is magic perfect. Nothing is perfect and magic is no exception to this. Mistakes can be made, spells ruined or mutated, potions changed. Nothing is forever. Everything adapts. The world would not exist if it did not. So by that logic, magic can make mistakes. If soulmates are magic, can soulmates be mistaken as well? Could the names be wrong?

He has never voiced such thoughts. He knows how that would go. He would be seen as even more of a Freak than he already is. Society as a whole holds soulmates to be sacred. Nothing is more special, more extraordinary, than soulmates. Even the names of the enemies are held to the same level.

It is as if the two words printed neatly on your wrist is in charge of your entire life. It is absurd. But Merlin forbid you question it. Clearly there is something wrong with you if you do so.

As if there aren't enough things wrong with him.

He gives his hair another sharp tug for good measure. This is ridiculous. He shouldn't be wasting time thinking about such rubbish. And that is what it is, rubbish. But he can't help it. There is some part of his brain that cannot let it go, no matter how much he wants to. He assumes it is the part of his brain that absorbs all social expectations and cues. He was raised in this culture of thought his entire life, be it Muggle or Magical. There will probably always be some part of his brain that categorizes it as important. That doesn't mean he has to agree with it.

Still, he wishes that part of his mind would quiet down. He doesn't need the added stress. Things are bad enough without worrying about the social concept of soulmates and enemies. He has other things on his mind.

But it would potentially explain why Draco is acting the way he is. If he has decided that Harry is his soulmate, than he would want to make amends. He want to be with him, romantically. Maybe. It could be that the idea is better than the actual thing in this case.

Or maybe his Godfather's lessons have finally gotten through his thick head and he is attempting to be a decent human being. They have been talking with him quite a bit. Severus will talk with Harry about his issues and Regulus will talk to Draco about his. So, maybe that is it.

He believe that less than his first theory.

Or maybe it is neither. Maybe this is all a cruel prank and as soon as he lets his guard down, Draco will strike. He has never forgotten that first Christmas, with the prank 'present'. He remembers the hope he felt and how quickly it was crushed. It is always that bloody hope that gets him into trouble. It has done him more harm than any of the dangers he has faced.

More than dragon fire, more than basilisk venom, more than Dementors, hope has proven to be the most dangerous thing in Harry's life. It burns more than anything. It drags him down deeper than anything. It tears him apart more viciously than anything else he has encountered. Hope is the true enemy because it can destroy you better than any hate can.

It is this theory that he fears most of all. Because it is the most likely one to be true.
Do people ever really change? Can they? Do they have that ability? Or do they simply hide parts of themselves from the world, showing them as need be?

“Harry Potter,” Tom Riddle greets coolly.

He is back in the Chamber. It looks the same as the last time he was here. The same chill in the air. The same puddles of water. The same looming walls. Eternal, as if he has never left. Only this time there is no diary laying on the ground. No Ginny laying beside it. He and Riddle are alone.

“I have been waiting for you, Harry Potter,” he says, smiling then.

It is a smile that has Harry suppressing a shiver. Not only is it cold and cruel, there is a possessive streak in it that scares him. An edge of madness in the shadow of that handsome face. Not that he shows his fear. He knows better than that. Never show your fear. That makes you prey.

Even as Riddle stalks forward, Harry does not move. He stands his ground. But he can't help notice just how graceful Riddle moves. Beautiful yet deadly. Like a jungle cat who has spotted its next meal. If Harry isn't careful, he just might be it.

“Far too long,” Riddle says as he stops in front of Harry.

Too close. He is far too close. But Harry doesn't run, doesn't retreat. He stares up at that handsome face and waits.

Riddle lifts a hand and gently strokes Harry's cheek. “For far too long have I been waiting for you. But now you are here. And you are mine, aren't you?” he asks.

“No,” Harry says in denial, “I'm not yours.” He shakes his head, turning away from his hand.

“Aw, but you are. You have my name, do you not?” If Riddle is discouraged by Harry's refusal, he certainly doesn't show it. All he does is cup Harry's face so that he has to look at him.

Harry does. “Yes, but that doesn't mean your my soulmate. That means your my enemy.”

Riddle laughs. “Come now Harry, you know that isn't true. For one thing, who can tell? It is only through our interactions can we figure out what our name represents. And we do fit so well together, don't we?”

“No we don't.” Harry says in denial. He wants to pull away, but he can't. Not because Riddle's hold is too strong. No. He is holding Harry as if he is something precious. And maybe that is the problem. People don't touch Harry. He goes out of his way to avoid physical contact. Because nothing good comes from touch – only pain. But even as part of his brain screams at him, another part enjoys this. Cherishes that softness Riddle is using.

“Do I have to remind you how similar we are? I told you once before. Your soul calls to me Harry, how can you not be mine?” He runs a thumb over Harry's cheek.

“It's not real,” he says and it almost hurts to do so, “There's been some kind of mistake, when it comes to my names. They only bring pain and hate. Never love. I'm not yours.”

“The world hasn't treated you right has it? It never has for me. That is why we belong together.
Because between the two of us, we can bring it to its knees. We can make it suffer for all that it has done to us. Can't you feel it? The way your magic sings? We fit.” Riddle's eyes bring with the bright intensity of his conviction. More than a little mad now, but oh so bright.

“I don't want to world to burn,” Harry says, “I just want to be left alone.”

“Oh Harry,” Riddle laughs, pulling him even closer, “Don't deny it. You are a Slytherin after all. What Slytherin does not like revenge? Don't deny it, embrace it. Together we can change the world.”

Riddle is hugging Harry now. Trapping him in his arms. Oh but what a sweet trap it is. A false promise of safety and power. A chance to pay back all the pain he has been caused over the years. A chance to show them all who he really is. A chance of happiness, with his soulmate by his side.

But a trap is still a trap, no matter how attractive it is. And Harry has had enough of cages and of traps. Hasn't he lived in one his entire life? Doesn't he trade one for the other at the end of each summer and the beginning of it? No, a cage is not something Harry will ever choose. He may have to now. He may not have a choice. But once he graduates, he vows that he will never be caged again. He will find a way. He will finally be free.

So he fights. He jerks violently away from those too tempting arms. From that possessive smile. He shakes his head. “No, that's not what I want. I don't want to rule the world. I don't want to have revenge. I want to be free. I doubt you can give me that.” He watches warily for Riddle's next move.

But Riddle doesn't approach him again. “And what makes you think that? You are mine Harry Potter. I take care of what is mine.”

“Isn't that just another cage then? Doesn't the idea of soulmates come with an implied cage? You are chained to another person for the rest of your life. You cannot tell me that you want that. That you believe in it. Love doesn't seem like something you want.”

“Love?” Riddle laughs, “No, love is for the weak,” he says in agreement, “But power. Power is another thing entirely. And oh what power you could bring me Harry Potter. Your blood sings with it. Isn't this a fair trade? You give me power and I stop the pain. I put you on top of the world, where no one else can touch you. Is that not what you want?”

Harry shakes his head. “No,” he says.

Riddle stalks forward again. “Let me show you. Let me show you just what I can give.” Giving Harry no time to move, he pulls him into a kiss.

It is like nothing Harry is expecting. If he ever thought of it, he would expect something rough. Demanding and taking. No thought of any other than himself. It isn't like that. No. Yes, there is still passion and possession enough in it. But it is a soft claiming. A gentle one. Careful, in the way one is careful with a frightened animal.

Yes, this is nothing like the kind of kiss Harry would have expected. It's almost nice. But that still does not mean it is welcome. He tries to get away from it, but unlike the hug, he can't. It is as if his feet are now stuck to the floor. He can't move.

Riddle ends the kiss, that crazed gentleness in his eyes. “Do you not see little one? You belong to me. Nothing can change that – not you nor me. Mother Magic has proclaimed it so. How can you fight that?”

That is definitely the wrong question to ask. Because Harry is a fighter. A survivor. A hero he will never be, but that does not mean he is weak. He has not surrendered yet. Why would he now? What
makes Riddle so special that he thinks that Harry will yield to him? He won't. Even when he doesn't want to continue, still he does.

With that thought in mind, he is able to move away. He throws himself violently back from Riddle, weakness be damned. You only stand your ground if it won't get you killed. “No,” he says firmly, feeling his blood rush through him. “No. I am not yours. I belong to no one.”

“Oh little one,” Riddle advances once more.

Harry feels a familiar tingle in his hands. He flexes them as he watches Riddle come towards him.

“Don't fight it little one. You are mine.” He reaches for Harry. “Don't deny it. Harry Potter, you are mine.”

“No!” Harry shouts and thrusts his hands forward, unleashing his power. There is a rush of gold and then he jerks up, waking from his nightmare with a start. Rapidly he checks to make sure he is alone. That Riddle hasn't somehow followed him. It is a ridiculous thought, but he doesn't care. He has to be sure.

But he is alone. He must not have shouted because no one comes in to check on him. All around him is silence, with only the usual creaks of the house. No sign of anything – or anyone – else. Good. He releases a sigh.

Voldemort is dead. Tom Riddle has been dead for even longer. Voldemort killed him before Harry had even been born, likely. There is no chance that he is coming back. Severus and Regulus made sure of that.

Still he has trouble going back to sleep after that, Riddle's words haunting him still. Because, however much he wants to admit it, Riddle was right. They fit. Damn him.

Sometimes hell is not a place, but a state of mind. Thoughts and fears run wild. The mind can make a heaven out of hell or a hell out of heaven. Sweet dreams.

Harry is exploring again. It was something he had been hesitant to do when he first arrived here. This isn't his home after all. He can't go snooping around as if he has a right to. All he needed to know was where the kitchen, the library, the loo and the room he is staying in is located.

But then it was made clear that the bedroom is his bedroom. His and no one else's. That he – somehow – has a right to it. A bed is a right and not a privilege. And oh boy, Severus' face when he said that. Yes, he certainly hates the Dursleys. There is no doubt in Harry's mind about that.

After that he had been ordered to explore. To make his room his own. To put his mark on things, so to speak. Then, after the legal guardian conversation, and especially after the adoption conversation, he was encouraged even more. If he agreed, this would be his home. Regulus assured him that it already was, whether he agreed or not. He will not be going back to the Dursleys. Ever. Apparently Severus just might kill them if he does. And “seeing as I happen to like my partner by my side and not in Azkaban, you will be doing no such thing.”

Well then.
That just might be the best news Harry has heard since this summer began. Maybe the best news he has ever heard, besides Voldemort's death that is. Never having to see the Dursleys again? Yes please. Briefly he wonders what the point of trying to legally tie Harry to them is, if he is never going back in any case, but he dismisses the thought. The answer is likely something he won't be comfortable hearing. Best to avoid that.

So he explores. Logically he shouldn't have anything left to explore by now. Grimmauld Place is big, but it is not that big. But every time Harry looks, there seems to be something new that he hasn't seen yet. A new room to see. It is almost as if the house has a mind of its own.

Regulus says that it is a possibility. Grimmauld Place is an old house, filled with ancient Black magic since it was built. Ancestral homes have a way of absorbing a family's magic after enough time has passed. They cannot technically think by themselves, but they do develop quirks of their own. And it is a good sign, that he is able to see so much. It means the house is warming up to him.

Harry isn't sure what to think about that. Even now, sometimes he wakes up expecting it to all be a dream. That he made up magic and Hogwarts and everything to cope with his life. It seems impossible that he will get the hang of it all. There is just so much to learn and to know about magic. So many rules to figure out. One life time doesn't seem like it will be enough.

The room he is currently in right now seems to be all boxes, junk and things that haven't been used in some time. The layer of dust speaks to that. There isn't much that is interesting, but Harry looks just in case. After all, he should know that looks can be deceiving. And that 'one man's trash is another man's treasure'. You never know.

But he thinks that looks are pretty straight forward this time. All he has gained for his trouble is a lung full of dust and cobwebs in his hair. Nothing exciting at all. But then he sees it, shoved into the very back corner of the room. A gramophone. An older one than the one in the sitting room by the looks of it. Carefully he maneuvers his way over and inspects it. Everything looks as if it should work. And there are even a stack of records sitting beside it.

Curiosity isn't in his nature, but he wonders. Well no, that isn't exactly true. Curiosity has been forcibly removed from his nature, but Regulus and Severus seemed determined to bring it back. Yet another reason to order him to explore.

He remembers when he first heard about magic. He had wanted to know everything about it. Yes, part of it was about survival. A very large part of it, there is no denying that. But another, smaller, quiet part wanted to know because he could. He could wonder. He could question this, surely. Magic was something new. Something exciting. A new thing to cautiously hope about. How could he not be curious about it? He wanted to know everything. However quickly that changed, he had burned with curiosity.

Now he is cautiously curious again. Music has never been a large part of Harry's life. It was never allowed to be. But now, here is an opportunity to change that. He doesn't even know what kind of music it is yet. He still wants to listen.

It takes a couple of trips, but eventually he has all the records in a neat pile outside the room. Hesitating only briefly, he goes back for the gramophone as well. This way he won't be controlling the one in the sitting room if anyone else wants to use it. He gathers everything up and goes to another sitting room that is rarely used. Setting everything down, he takes the time to look at his prize.

It doesn't take long to figure out he has probably found Black's old collection. For one thing, there is a strong rock theme to it. For another, it is all Muggle. Even he has heard of some these bands,
Although others he has no idea who they are. He may not know all of the songs, but he should recognized some of them.

Choosing a record at random, he carefully sets it down and sets the needle. The song has him by the first note. There is something hauntingly beautiful about it. Something that touches Harry like nothing else has before. And then the artist begins to sing.

_Every time when I look in the mirror/All these lines on my face getting clearer_

His breath catches in his throat. Without even realizing it, he leans forward, as if he can absorb the music better that way. He isn't even sure that he is breathing anymore. He certainly isn't moving. It is as if the song has frozen him.

_Sing with me, sing for the years/Sing for the laughter, sing for the tears/Sing with me, just for today/Maybe tomorrow, the good Lord will take you away_

Yes. This. This exactly. The song ends and Harry blinks as if he has been released from a trance. He has never realized that music could touch you so. That it is magic in its own right. He has heard music before, of course he has. It would be impossible not to. But until now, it is as if he has been deaf. Nothing else he has ever heard speaks to him like this.

Absently he goes on to the other records, but that one song sticks with him. None of the others manage to pull quite the same reaction out of him although some are very good. Eventually he goes back to that song. Puts it on repeat and lays down, letting the music take him. Spread out on the floor everything seems easier to deal with just then. All of his worries and questions and insecurities. None of them seem to matter quite as much just then. As if they are a problem for another Harry Potter, not him.

He startles himself when he realizes that he is singing along with it. Obviously he is no Aerosmith, but at least he isn't _too_ off tune. Singing is certainly not in his future, but once again, he doesn't care. Not here, not now. Not when he is alone at least. He isn't about to start singing around Severus or Regulus. Definitely not around Draco.

He stays like that until dinner, reluctantly dragging himself away. When he is done eating, he goes back to the room and the song.

Regulus had seemed amused by this. “Found Siri's old collection did you?”

Harry nods shyly, not sure if he is going to be mad or not. He had said he could explore, but what if this was something off limits? These aren't technically Regulus' after all. What if he isn't allowed to touch it? What if-

“I can't believe Mother kept it,” Regulus says.

“The mutt likely spelled it so she couldn't,” Severus snorts.

Regulus grins. “Sounds about right,” he agrees, “Merlin how he use to annoy her before he moved out. Drove her up a wall. She tried everything from banishing it to silencing it. Nothing ever seemed to work. I had thought he took it with him when he moved in with Potter, but I should have known better.”

“Five galleons he charmed it to play even after he left,” Severus says with a smirk.

“No bet,” Regulus says, returning it, “It's far too likely. I never heard it, but then again, I didn't have the same burning hate for it. I only pretended I did when Mother was watching.”
“Yes well at least your taste in music is somewhat tolerable.”

“I could say the same to you.”

Draco doesn't say anything, although he does look questioningly at Harry.

Harry just shrugs and goes back to his plate. He leaves after he finishes, Regulus shooing him away with a smirk.

“And Potter,” Severus says, “do remember that other songs exist than just Dream On, hmm?”

Harry blushes. “Yes Sir,” he says and then flees. Back to his music.

.

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They say music is the key to the soul. It opens the heart and let's the spirit fly free. Music is able to break through even the coldest of hearts. So don't be afraid to feel whenever that special song starts to play. Embrace it. Happy flying.

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When Harry comes down to breakfast, it is to find Draco practically bouncing in his seat. He watches curiously, but doesn't say anything. He has never seen him act so... undignified before. Not like this. He has seen Draco sneer and smirk and laugh, but he has never seen him act like this. Like a kid. Just like an excited kid. He didn't think he knew how, honestly.

“Harry,” Draco greets happily, “Uncle Sev is going to take us to the Manor to fly!” he says enthusiastically.

“I won't be if you keep annoying me,” Severus says from behind the paper he is reading.

“Of course not Uncle Sev,” Draco says in agreement and goes back to bouncing.

Severus sighs. “If you cannot seize behaving as such, then go get ready,” he orders.

“Yes,” Draco shouts as he leaps from his seat and runs out the room.

“And no running,” Severus calls after him.

Harry watches and then goes back to eating breakfast. Flying. He isn't sure how he feels about this. Just because he now has a broom doesn't mean he really planned on using it. Black had been so excited when he gave it to him, but Harry is rather indifferent to the whole thing. Faster broom on the market or not, he is in no real hurry to try it. He takes his time eating.

Food is still somewhat of a novelty, when he isn't at Hogwarts. It deserves much more attention than the day's activity. He briefly wonders if he can get out of it, then dismisses the idea. Severus isn't likely to let him excuse himself. He is funny about making sure Harry burns off his 'excessive energy that all teenagers are blessed with and all watchers curse'. Then again, neither is Regulus. Maybe if he truly hates it enough the first time, he won't have to do it again, but today he is going.

“You do not seem to be sharing Draco's level of excitement,” Severus says. How he knows this is a mystery. He is still reading the paper. 
Harry shrugs.

“I require a verbal answer Mr Potter,” he says sternly.

“Um no Sir – Severus,” he corrects, “not really.”

“And why ever not? I assumed that the broom is of some interest to you. If not before, at least when it was received.”

“It's not bad,” Harry admits, “But the only time I've ever flown was in first year with the Gryffindors. It was better to keep my head down then. And everyone acts as if the only reason to fly is playing Quidditch. And I don't play,” he says obviously.

“Hmm, yes well I can see why you would have a bad first impression of it,” Severus says as he folds the paper, setting it down, “The dunderheads are rather obsessed with the game, as it were. But despite popular belief, one does not need to play Quidditch to enjoy flying. If your genes are anything to go by, you should be an excellent flier.”

Harry holds back a wince. Black had already told him what a wonderful flier his Dad was. He was a star Chaser for Gryffindor. Apparently there is even a trophy with his name on it somewhere in Hogwarts. He doesn't know what to think about that. He always gets a bit wary when Black mentions his Dad. It is as if he is comparing them, looking for his best friend in his son. To see if he is measuring up or not. That's not really something Harry is comfortable with.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he is afraid that one day Black is going to decide he doesn't measure up at all and cut their connection. It wouldn't be surprising at all actually. From the stories he likes to tell, Harry is nothing like his Dad. Not really. James was handsome and popular and a prankster. Harry isn't any of those things. And some of those stories make him uncomfortable as well. The pranks... they don't always sound like pranks. They sound like bullying. The saying 'boys will be boys' can only go so far when excusing certain behavior. He wonders some times, although he'll never ask, that if he were alive at the same time, if James might 'prank' him too. Like he pranked Severus. He's Slytherin and an easy target. It seems likely.

Not that he is close to Black, for it to hurt that badly when he does. But would still be another blow. Even his godfather – the man who was suppose to raise him – doesn't want him. He is getting better, that is clear from the letters. But does he really want to know Harry? Or James Potter's son?

“Black mentioned that,” he says cautiously. He never mentions Black's name in front of Severus if he can help it. Those two still don't get along. Not that Harry blames him.

Severus scoffs. “Black would. No, I am not referring to Potter. I was talking about Lily in fact. She was always an excellent flier, although she never played on her team. It never appealed to her.”

Harry perks up at that. Everyone always has a bad habit of talking about his Dad, but never his Mum. Only Severus really does and only sparingly at that. He has never said anything about it, but from what Severus has said, Harry can tell they were close. It must have hurt, losing her. “Really?” he asks lowly.

“Yes,” he nods, “I have mentioned that we grew up together. The first time I saw her, she was using magic to fly off of a swing – literally. She had excellent control even then. Everyone can brag about the wonder that is James Potter all they like, but if Lily had ever decided to play, she would have been the star Seeker. There is no doubt of that.”

“Wicked,” Harry says softly.
“Wicked indeed. Never let anyone tell you that you are all Potter's spawn. It is clear to those who care to look that you are Lily's son as well.”

Harry is tempted to ask what exactly does he share with his Mum. How are they similar? But he can see the shadow on Severus' face just from saying that much. So he nods instead. “Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome. Now eat up. Flying, no matter how little or much enthusiasm, is involved, burns many calories. You cannot afford to lose any extra as it is.”

“Than maybe I shouldn't go,” he says.

Severus snorts. “Nice try brat. You are going. If anything, you can truthfully tell your dogfather what you think of it next time he writes. Because he will ask, believe me. He is persistent like that.”

“What an inspiring talk,” Regulus says as he walks into the room. “Mentally preparing yourself, are you?” he asks, motioning to Severus' very large cup of coffee.

“I am taking the tornado flying today, what do you think?” he asks dryly.

Regulus laughs and kisses Severus on the cheek. “Well the tornado is ripping through his room upstairs getting ready. You best hurry if you do not want to be left behind,” he teases.

“He better not if he wants to go today,” Severus says darkly. “You are aware that you owe me, correct?”

“As if I could think anything else,” Regulus says as he sits down and begins to eat. “I would take them myself, but I really do need to finish reviewing that law today before it goes to the Wizengamot on Friday.”

Severus nods. “I am aware,” he says stiffly.

Regulus laughs. “Come now, it can't be that bad. Maybe having Harry there will calm Draco down some.”

Severus looks at Regulus disbelievingly, not even bothering with a verbal response.

“Go on and get ready now,” Regulus tells Harry, “And don't worry, everything will be fine.”

Harry does as he is told, resisting the urge to echo Severus' look. Everything will be fine? Since when has that ever applied to his life? Never, that's when. But it will do no good to point that out, so he stays silent. Better to keep quiet than to risk another lecture about pessimism and being 'too realistic'. More like the rest of the world is too optimistic.

Harry has always been a 'glass is half empty' kind of person. Really, who could blame him? He absently rubs the teeth mark between his forefinger and thumb. No one, that's who, if they have any sense. Then again, Harry has come to find that so few people actually do. It's both shocking and yet not surprising at all.

Draco is already waiting in the hall when he comes down again. He is still bouncing and still clearly trying Severus' nerves. He must really hate flying to be in a mood like this right now. “We are taking a portkey,” he announces.

Harry's stomach drops. A portkey. Of course they are taking a portkey. Bad enough that it made him sick when he had to use one to get to the Quidditch World Cup. Then he was whisked away by one when Voldemort was resurrected. He really hates portkeys.
And that's likely why they are using one. Severus is forcing him to face his fear. Merlin. Couldn't they go another way? Then again, Harry can name a mishap with every single magic transportation he has been forced to take thus far. So maybe it's not the method. Maybe it's just his luck instead. That sounds about right.

“Hold on tightly,” Severus says as he holds out a quill.

The familiar twist in his stomach takes him and then they arrive. Harry stays on his feet by virtue of Severus holding him upright. He grimaces, both at the weakness and at the sensation. Merlin does he hate portkeys. Never mind the trauma involved. Can't they invent a way of travel that doesn't make you sick?

Draco clearly has no problem with it. With an excited whoop, he mounts his broom and takes off.

Severus hands Harry an anti-nausea potion. He nods and drinks it. Yuck.

“Better?” Severus asks.

Harry nods again and Severus lets go. He pockets the empty bottle and motions for Harry to follow him. “Come,” he says.

Harry does, looking around with interest. He can admit that Malfoy Manor is impressive looking. It is big and beautiful and just what one would expect when the word Manor is mentioned. There are extensive gardens out front. A groomed forest off to the side. There are albino peacocks walking around for some reason or another. Maybe because Lord Malfoy felt he could relate to them – stuck up and white.

He bites his tongue to hold back a giggle. He probably shouldn't mention that thought out loud. It isn't really appropriate. Although Severus would likely find it amusing, even if he didn't say that. And the twins definitely would. Maybe he should mention that in his next letter? It can't hurt after all. It certainly explains why Draco has the personality that he does. How can one grow up here without being spoiled? It seems inevitable. He is surrounded by wealth and by beauty. How could Draco ever have wanted to befriend a scrawny mutt like him? Oh that's right.

Because of a name.

Because of a stupid title.

What a waste. It is enough to bring down his mood even farther. Without much thought, he begins to sing Dream On in his head. He is still mesmerized by that song. And it makes him feel slightly better.

“In the air brat,” Severus says as they reach an open field obviously designed for flying, “I do not plan to spend my entire day here.”

“Yes Severus,” Harry says and mounts his broom.

“If you truly hate it that much, you can come down. But I require a ten minute test run before you do. Yes?” he asks for confirmation.

“Yes,” Harry repeats, feeling better at hearing that. He pauses for one more moment and then kicks off. It only takes a second for the lessons Madam Hooch taught him to come back to him. Just like riding a bike, although Harry can’t say how accurate that is. He was never allowed to learn. Leaning forward, he shoots up and out. The wind blows through his hair and he can't help but let out a quiet
Draco is busy zooming around the field, paying no mind to what Harry is doing. That is fine with him. He doesn't want the extra attention right now. But it doesn't take long for excitement to sweep him up as well. This... he has never experienced anything like this. He always stayed close to the ground. It was better that way. He wasn't joking about the Gryffindors. It was better to pretend to be invisible around them. Just like the Dursleys – pretend that he does not exist.

As if their first class wasn't a minor calamity enough, what with Draco and Longbottom and everyone else. Longbottom was a bit of a disaster then. To be honest, he still is. Not that Harry has anything against him. Honestly, not counting the twins, he's the most tolerable Gryffindor there is. He's never said or done anything against Harry. Mostly, he's just kept out of his way. Actually, Harry is fairly sure Longbottom was terrified of Harry during their younger years – especially second. Now he just avoids him. He avoids most people actually.

But enough of that. He does a loop because he can. And then he does another one. Then a flip and then a spin. Yes. Alright, so he likes flying. As he is discovering, he likes flying quite a bit. He feels free. As if, when he is up here, nothing else matters. All the chaos and the mess and depression are down on the ground, but he is safe up here. It can't get him. Can't drag him down.

He zooms across the field like those demons are chasing him. But they'll never catch him. Not up here. Not when he has the wind in his hair and the broom between his legs. He is invincible up here. Free.

He is so free.

Never before has he felt something like this. Most of the time, everything threatens to drag him down. For the ground to open up and swallow his whole. To crush him beneath its weight. Even when nothing specific is going wrong, he has always been aware of that pressure. It never leaves him, just increases or decreases as life goes on. He never realized just how heavy it was until now.

It is likely to be even worse than ever now, since he knows this. But he doesn't have to think about that yet. Just this once, he is going to ignore the oncoming reality for now and enjoy this. Everything else will catch up with him soon enough. Now is the time for fun.

Maybe Severus is right and he is an 'excellent flier' because this feels as easy as breathing. He barely has to think about what he wants to do before he is. There is no worry and no hesitating. He flies.

“Potter,” a voice calls up at him, breaking him from the zone his mind had settled into.

He looks down and sees Severus motioning for him to come down. He waves to show that he has heard and turns back around towards him. A crazy thought enters his head and he lets it. Why not? He knows he can do it. And think of the rush. He drops down into a dive.

Watching the ground carefully, he leans forward so that he is practically laying on the broom. Wind rushes all around him, whipping his hair against his head. His eyes tear up slightly. As the ground gets closer and closer, he waits. He keeps going, watching, waiting, steady until – now. He pulls out of the dive, barely a meter from the ground.

“Merlin Harry,” Draco says, “that was wicked!”

“Oh joy,” Severus says with a sigh, “there are now two of you to give me grey hairs. Were you attempting to become one with the ground with that stunt? Or are you convinced you are now indestructible?”
Harry shrugs, looking down. He didn't think he did anything wrong. He knew he could do it. He wasn't in any danger. But obviously Severus disagrees. And here comes the weight again. It is almost a physical presence as he dismounts and joins them.

“You are a natural,” Draco continues as if he didn't hear Severus at all, “A bloody natural. I can't believe it!”

“Language Mr Malfoy,” Severus says and is promptly ignored.

Harry fidgets. This isn't that big of a deal, is it? So he can do a couple of fancy tricks, so what? He's seen a few Quidditch games, even if he never joined the others in the stands. He knows that they all have tricks they can do. Draco certainly does from what he has seen. Doesn't everyone? What is the big deal? He can't be anything that special. Ignoring those first year lessons, this is the first time he has flown. He can't be that good that Draco, someone who has been flying for years, is that impressed.

“You should join the Quidditch team this year. You'd be the greatest Seeker ever! Think about how much we could crush Gryffindor then. Weaslette wouldn't stand a chance against you.”

Harry hunches further into himself. Quidditch? Seeker? Him? What a ridiculous idea.

“Enough Draco,” Severus says sternly, “It is time to go. Grab hold of the quill now.”

Both Harry and Draco obey. Harry doesn't even feel so nauseous this time, mind too occupied by what Draco said. Of course this makes his landing even worse than usual and he almost knocks Severus over as he stumbles.

“Easy brat. No need to take both of us out,” he says, but his hold is still gentle.

“Sorry Sir,” Harry says, eyes on the ground.

“Go wash up Draco, it will be time for lunch soon.”

“Yes Uncle Severus,” he says as he rushes off, that bounce still in his step.

“Mr Potter,” Severus says, tilting his head up, “remember now – do not let anyone bully you into something that you do not wish to do. Is that clear?”

“Yes Sir – Severus,” he corrects. He can remember the order most of the time, but there are still times that he slips back into old habits.

“Very good. A love of flying does not mean a love of Quidditch. There is nothing wrong with having one and not the other. Just as there is nothing wrong with having both – in moderation,” he adds.

Harry can't help the small smile that forms at that. Yes, Severus must really hate flying for some reason. “Yes Severus,” he says.

“Good,” he nods sharply, “Now go clean up and come back down for lunch. Maybe this will finally help your appetite.”

“Yes Severus,” he nods and goes to obey. What he says is true. Harry finds that it is hard to eat sometimes. He isn't always hungry enough for it. Likely a cause from his childhood. He is being given nutrient potions of course, but those can only do so much. They aren't a substitute for real food. And he needs to gain the weight apparently. Something about there being a difference between
skeletal and lanky. Plus he will never reach his full height potential if he doesn't. He is already unlikely enough to reach it as it is. Merlin does he hate being the shortest person in their year.

But now his stomach is growling, ready for food. Maybe this will help.

Freedom from the Earth's gravity is wonderful thing. There is noting weighing you down. Noting can touch up, up there. It is only when you come back down do the troubles start again.

Of course that isn't the end of it. Now that Draco has the idea in his head, he won't let it go. He is determined to convince Harry to play Quidditch. He is absolutely positive that Harry is the best flier he has ever seen. And he is perfectly built to be a Seeker. More than Draco himself is. He says that he likes being a Chaser more, but they needed a Seeker when he joined the team.

He is like a dog with a bone with the idea. No, not a dog with a bone. That is too mild. He is like a hungry tigers after a deer. He is determined to corner it and have his way. It is an apt description in Harry's mind. He certainly feels hunted.

He has gone from trying to be nice to Harry to constantly badgering him. It is as if the mere idea of Quidditch has taken over his mind. He has noticed a similar effect in others at school. The twin's little brother Ron is a good example of this. He is Quidditch crazy. Especially about the Chudley Cannons. However little they actually win.

Regulus and Severus are good at putting a stop to it whenever they hear him, but they can't always be around. Mostly Harry tries to ignore him, but he isn't always successful. It's like a mosquito that is bothering you – sometimes you just have to smack it.

Such as:


“Because I don't want to.”

“But you're an amazing flier! How can you let that talent go to waste?”

“I'm not. I just don't want to play.”

Or:

“I bet everyone will love you then. You'd be the star of the team.”

“And what happens when I lose a game?”

“How could you lose? But it will be fine, the team supports each other. Just like the House supports each other.”

“Have you by chance suffered from memory loss? Or were you just that blind to my past four years?”
“That was then, this is now,” he waves off, “They'll love you now.”

Or:

“ Seriously Potter, why?”

“What else in on the field besides our team?”

“The Gryffindors?”

“And?”

“The quaffle?”

“ And ?”

“The bludgers? Is that what your worried about? You'll be fine. That's what the beaters are for.”

“And when you don't trust your beaters?”

“Merlin you're impossible.”

So overall, Harry doesn't know what to think about the entire thing. Or, he does, but that doesn't mean a small – very small – part of him isn't constantly thinking about it. Not because he really wants to, but because Draco won't belt up about it. It's hard to ignore that buzzing in your ear forever.

Sure, he has some good arguments. But Harry has some better ones against it. It's just that Draco isn't hearing them. As if the mere thought of Quidditch has robbed him of all common sense and basic listening skills.

So yes, the Slytherins will probably love him when they see how good he is. But how long will that last? In Harry's experience, fame never lasts long. Look how quickly it abandoned him once he was Sorted. It never came back after that either. Sure, there were times when life was better or worse, but it was never really good. He was most definitely never popular.

Why would he do anything for them now? House pride is suppose to be an important thing. That's the first place you form your social connections for the rest of your life. Where you meet your friends and the people you are going to spend the next seven years with. Your House is suppose to be your family and the crowning characteristic about you. Everyone always looks for the color of your tie before anything else.

But what if that isn't true? What if you don't fit in with your Housemates? Luna is a prime example of that. They are always stealing her things and mocking her. Or what if everyone thinks you belong in another House? People always complain the Granger should have been a Ravenclaw, not a Gryffindor. What if your House has never done anything for you? Like Harry. How can you have House pride then? There is nothing to be proud of.

This isn't malicious. It's not as if he wants them to lose or anything like that. He just simply doesn't care if they do or not. He may be in Slytherin, but he's not a Slytherin, not really. Not in the ways that count. Yes, personality wise, he is definitely a Slytherin. But for everything else? No. No he's not. He never will be.

Maybe this would help. Maybe this would be the tipping point to include him. They would accept him then if he would be their prized Seeker. But Harry has a distinct dislike for people who use him like that. They only keep him around when he is useful and throw him away when he is not. No
thank you. He has been used enough against his will without voluntarily signing up for more.

He may not have House pride, but he still has his own pride. And if not pride, then dignity at least. Enough to want to avoid being another whipping boy if he can help it. Because he is worth it.

Or at least that is what Severus and Regulus keep telling him.

Maybe one day he'll even believe it.

And there is another reason he doesn't want to be on the team – the twins. They are on the Gryffindor team. Not that he thinks that they will hate him if he plays against them – mostly. But that still doesn't mean that he wants to play against them. They are his only friends besides Luna. And while it's unlikely that he would lose them over this, why take that chance?

Add to that that they are the beaters of the Gryffindor team and Harry is most definitely bowing out. He doesn't fancy breaking an arm – or worse – by being hit with a bludger. Because while they are his friend, they aren't likely to go easy on him. Where would the fun in that be? If he doesn't trust his two friends not to break him, he certainly isn't going to trust his Housemates to keep him safe.

Besides, the rest of the Slytherins have a way of cheating. Or most of them, anyways. There are a few that don't. They play rough – rougher than the other teams. Although, funny enough, no one seems to realize just how vicious the Hufflepuff team is. For the 'spare' House that everyone seems to forget and dismiss, they always seem like one of the strongest to Harry. But just because they don't stand out, they aren't important. Stupid.

So Harry thinks that he has plenty of good arguments against playing Quidditch. Now if only Draco would really hear them.

You cannot force a butterfly out of its cocoon before it is ready. It will never be strong enough of you do. Unable to survive. And just like a butterfly, you cannot push a person into doing something they do not wish to do. Eventually they will break, one way or another.

But just like all pressure that builds, it always finds a way out eventually. If not slowly, carefully, then violently and abruptly. And that is exactly what happens. Obviously Draco hasn't learned from the first time that Harry does have a temper. It just expresses itself different than other people. Ironically enough, it isn't even Quidditch that tips the scale.

They are both in the library reading. Or Harry is reading and Draco is pretending to read. He is fidgeting more than anything else. Harry wishes that he would say what he wants or leave. His tension is like another person sitting in the room with them.

“So Harry,” Draco says, trying for casual, but falling short of the mark, “I was wondering when we go back to Hogwarts if you wanted to go to Hogsmeade with me?”

Harry lifts his head so that he can stare at him. Hogsmeade? He wants to go to Hogsmeade? With Harry? “As in friends or a date?” he asks, just to be sure. He assumes he knows which one Draco is hoping for, but better clarify it now.
“As a date obviously,” Draco huffs, crossing his arms. It still does a poor job of hiding his nerves. Harry thinks about it – for about a second – and then shakes his head. “No thank you,” he says.

“What?” Draco asks, sputtering, “What do you mean no?”

“I mean exactly that. No. I do not want to go with you on a date to Hogsmeade.”

“And why not?” he asks.

Merlin, here comes the pouting. How predictable. It might be fair to say that it is to be expected, that old habits die hard, but Harry isn't feeling particularly fair right now. He's been annoyed with him for some time. And now he wants to go on a date with him? No thank you indeed. There are much better ways to get to know Harry then the way he is going about it.

“Because I don't want to. It's not a hard concept to understand,” he pauses for dramatics, “Or at least I didn't think it was. Do you need me to explain it to you?” Alright, so he's more than a little annoyed. He's pretty much done.

“I know what 'no' means. I want to know why you are saying no,” Draco says angrily.

“And I just told you why,” Harry says, much calmer by comparison, “This isn't some elaborate plot or whatever it is you're thinking about. I said no because I mean no. Take it at face value for once. Not everything has a deeper meaning.”

“Obviously there must be if you are rejecting me.”

Harry snorts at that. Really? Well he always knew Draco was a bit of a drama queen, so no real surprise there. Still.

“What is that suppose to mean Potter?” Draco frowns across at Harry as if he thinks that will do anything but make him look like a spoiled brat.

“You don’t know the meaning of the word reject Malfoy,” he says. Well if Draco wants to play that way, then they can. He might think he can win that way, but Harry has far more practice with this. Draco is the one who wants him right now, not the other way around.

“Of course I do. I have an extensive vocabulary after all. You are rejecting me right now.”

Harry rolls his eyes at that. “No, I'm saying that I don't want to go on a date you. That's something simple. Do you have any idea what true rejection is?” Because Harry knows. He has lived it all of his life.

“What?” Draco makes that mistake of asking, “Since your obviously so much more superior that I am.”

Harry smiles. It's not a particularly happy smile. “Rejection,” he says, “is when the people who raise you want nothing to do with you. When they stuff you into a cupboard and leave you there to forget about you. When they do the bare minimum to keep you alive and nothing more. When they make you feel worthless and a burden all your life.

“Rejection is when the people who are suppose to be your family mock you instead. Belittle you. Hurt you and abandon you and isolate you. Get entertainment from your pain and then leave you when you aren't fun anymore. Rejection is when time and time again your entire world turning against you. Rejection is trust issues and self esteem issues and depression because no one ever gives
a shite about you. Why should they? You aren't worth it.

“Rejection is being used when you are needed and then tossed aside again. Rejection is no one ever listening to a word you say because why would they? Obviously you don't matter. Obviously it doesn't matter what your opinion is. They will do it anyways.”

Draco's mouth hangs open.

“That is what rejection is. That is what my life is. Grow up Draco,” he says as he stands up, taking his book with him, “Get over yourself and learn that no means no.” He turns to walk out of the room.

“What about our name?” Draco asks, finally getting his voice back, “You're my soulmate. Isn't that suppose to mean something.”

Harry sighs and turns his head back around. “I thought it did when I was younger. Now I'm not so sure. What is the point? The only reason you want anything to do with me is a printed name on your wrist. It could mean something, but it doesn't always have to. What does it say about people, that they only care about someone because of a phenomenon they can't explain? They don't care about the person. They care about the name.”

“Soulmates are suppose to be magic's gift to us,” Draco says softly.

“That's nice,” Harry says, “It's a nice thought I suppose. But that still doesn't change anything. It still doesn't change your reasoning. It still doesn't change my life. What of it?”

“Do you not believe in soulmates then?” he asks.

Harry laughs bitterly. “More like soulmates don't believe in me. Have a good day Draco,” he says, leaving the room.

Merlin, what a time.

Harry is laying in the middle of the floor, gramophone on full blast. Dream On is on repeat. He is trying to drown out all of the thoughts in his head. Needless to say, it isn't working. It is still far too loud in his head. On the floor beside him is one of the reasons for these thoughts. A letter from Black.

Hey Pup,

I'm glad to hear that you like your broom. I knew you would be a natural. How could you not be, with James as your Dad. He was a great flier. He won Gryffindor the Quidditch Cup three years in a row. He'd be ecstatic to learn that you inherited his skill. Have you thought about trying out for your team? You'd be playing for the enemy of course – ha, ha – but you should try. It's a ton of fun.

Besides flying, how else is your summer going? I hope you aren't spending all your time reading. Although Moony likes to remind me that reading is a fine pastime. Nothing wrong with studying,
according to him. Swot. Make sure you are having fun though. Get out and run around a little. A kid like you needs that.

And don't let my little brother and his greasy git boss you around too much either. Despite what they might think, they aren't in charge of you during the summer. Let me know if they get to be too much and I'll pay them a little visit. I haven't had a chance to pull a good prank in such a long time. You could help, if you wanted. Learn the family trade. I'm sure you have fun with the Weasley twins. The stories I've heard about those two, it makes me so proud. Not as proud as I am of you pup though.

Hey, or maybe you can come see us instead. We are on the beach right now. The sun and the sand and the waves. I'm learning how to surf. Moony laughs now, but I'll show him. I'm getting better at it. Seeing you at your birthday wasn't nearly enough time. I want to get to know my favorite godson. Think about it, it is sure to be fun.

Love, Padfoot

ps Moony sends his love and 'well wishes' too

Harry is trying not to think about it. It's not that there is anything inherently wrong with the letter, it's just... there are things wrong with it. Things that make him uncomfortable. Black doesn't mean any harm. He knows that. He never means any harm. But, at the same time, he always says exactly the wrong thing.

Take Quidditch for example. He has already heard what an amazing flier James was supposed to be. He's heard it multiple times. But there is no mention of Lily. Nothing about his Mum at all. Did he not know she could fly? Or did he just not care? Does that make him one of those people that think flying is for Quidditch and nothing else, then? And that note about him 'playing for the enemy'. Sure, he says that he is joking. He even makes a note about it so that Harry will know for sure. But is he really joking? Or does he still care that much that he is in Slytherin?

Sometimes he acts as if it is no big deal. Other times he acts as if he thinks all Slytherins are either Death Eaters, or destined to become one. As if Slytherin is another word for evil. And even if he thinks Harry is the exception, well. That's still not all that reassuring. Because what if one day, he decided Harry isn't any more? Or that Harry is really a Gryffindor inside, he just needs someone to bring it out for him. He hates when people attempt to 'bring something out' in him that isn't there to begin with. It's terribly uncomfortable.

The Wizarding World has been trying to do just that ever since he came to Hogwarts at age eleven. He was supposed to be Gryffindor and their beloved hero and the poster child for everything good in their world. Instead he is a reflection of everything that went wrong. Everything that they want to hide. So he is a disappointment instead. When they learned that they could not force him, they turned on him. Abandoned him. Either he fits their image they have of him or he is worthless.

He has been worthless for a long time now. Ever since he was born, practically. Sure, Black and Lupin have told him how much his parents loved him. But what do they know? He knows adults can put on a good show when they want to. And even if they are right, well, it hardly matters. It's not as if he remembers his parents. All he remembers are the Dursleys. And he was certainly worthless to them, beyond the manual labour he provided.

Severus and Regulus both like to tell him that he is wrong. That he is worth something. He is more than people's expectations. Sometimes he believes them. Most of the time he doesn't. After all, what are two people compared to the rest of the world? Well, five people. The twins are always insisting that he is their best mate or little brother. When they aren't insisting he is 'their Lord' that is. Because that joke hasn't grown old to them yet. And then there is Luna, who has never said anything about it
directly, but tells him in her own unique way.

Black and Lupin have never said it, but then Harry isn't sure that they understand that they need to. He isn't sure that they understand a bunch of different things about him. Him being a Slytherin is only one of them.

What does Black mean that he is proud of Harry? Why? Proud of him for what? As far as Harry knows, he hasn't done anything deserving of much praise. Especially from a man he barely knows. Letters can only do so much after all. Not when they haven't been in contact all that long, according to Harry. He is sure others would say differently. And Black has been recovering from Azkaban for a long time now. So what is his reasoning? Are they just empty words?

Harry cannot stand empty words. They are useless. Words in general tend to be useless. It is actions that matter. If you have actions to back up your words, then that is different. They can mean something then. But until that point, they are a waste of time for everyone involved.

And what is this about him being his favorite godson? Of course he is. He is Black's only godson. More empty words. Because if he claims that he loves him so much, why did he abandon him as a baby? Why was he raised by the Dursleys instead of him? He says he lost his temper and went after Pettigrew for revenge. That means that revenge means more than Harry does. Right? Between your godson and the person who betrayed your best friends, shouldn't you choose the former to take care of first? Isn't that a godparents job?

But he didn't. He let his temper control him. He let Harry fall through the cracks. He wasn't as important, therefore he was forgotten. How is that love?

Yes, that is the kind of love he is use to. Never being anyone's top priority. He's use to it. And maybe Black is trying to make it up to Harry now. Maybe he is trying to correct his mistake. But if he is, he is doing a poor job of it. Most of the time, he makes Harry ache more than anything. It is a familiar ache, so he doesn't think much on it. But that doesn't mean that it isn't there. That doesn't mean that it hasn't always been there.

The ache for connection. The ache for someone – just once – to truly care. It has never happened before. It will never happen now. Because, even if it happens, Harry won't believe it. He is too damaged by now. Too cynical. Too distrustful. Too broken. He can't believe that anyone could truly care for him for just him – just Harry. Not for the Boy-who-Lived or anything else they want from him. It has been too long. He has heard too much hate. How can he believe when, eventually, it always seems as if he is proven wrong?

So he never says anything to Black when he talks like that. When he makes Harry ache. How do you even have that conversation anyways? He doesn't know how. With Severus, he is the one directing the conversation, asking all the questions. He seems to understand, at least a little bit. More than most people anyways. Regulus too, in some ways. Then again, sometimes they don't get it either.

So Black? Harry doubts he would ever understand. If Severus and Regulus don't, why should he. Then again, if Regulus understands some, it would reason that he would as well. But he wouldn't. Because he doesn't want to understand. That's what it seems like to Harry. He rejected his past – all of it. And that means not reflecting on past hurts. On the things that would help him see Harry as he is, not what he should have been.

And then there is the note about the pranks. How he assumes that Harry likes them. Sure, he doesn't mind them. That would be impossible, being friends with Fred and George the way he is. But he doesn't ever really help them. He has, with a few, but only a few. And that was because they were a
school wide event. It sounded fun. But other than that? No. He will listen to them, yes, but he lets
them be.

Black sees them as the next generation of Marauders. But they aren’t. Not really. Yes, they are
master pranksters, there is no denying that. But they aren’t bullies. They never targeted one person or
one group for long. Anyone was fair play to them. The only exception seems to be Harry himself.
He’s even seen them pull a prank on each other before. The results are usually hilarious to watch.
And it they did cross the line, well, that was also what Harry was there for. Not that they would do it
maliciously. But sometimes they get so wrapped up in the plot that they forget to look beyond that.

Of course they have a malicious side to them as well. They can be just as cruel as anyone else. But
they usually save that for those that deserve it. Mainly, those that hurt Harry. Protective they are and
they aren’t afraid to show it either. Last year was testament to that. They can be downright vicious
when they decide there is a call for it.

But that is not the point right now. The point is – how could he even consider visiting someone that
misunderstands him so much? It sounds like a disaster in the making. Either he would spend the
entire time being frowned upon because he is not conforming to standards or he would be
pretending. Either way he would be miserable. He’d be constantly tense, waiting for the other shoe to
drop.

He’s never been to the beach before. Never seen the ocean. He can admit he is curious about that. It
sounds like a good thing to see. But another thing, to add to why it is a bad idea – he can’t swim.
Forget learning to surf, he has no idea how to even stay afloat. Of course he can’t. Who would have
taught him? Nor would he trust either Black or Lupin to teach him. So he would be limited to what
he could do.

He sighs in frustration. So much for not thinking about it. At least it is better than thinking about his
latest fight with Draco. It seems that every time he does, he ends up revealing uncomfortable truths
about himself that he had no intentions of sharing. He really needs to control that before it gets him
into trouble. Just because he hasn’t used those truths against Harry yet, doesn't mean that he might
one day. Or that he will use this unfortunate habit to his advantage.

But what he told him is true. Not just about rejection, but what he thinks about soulmates. About
how meaningless it can all be. Everyone is so focused on the name that they forget to focus on the
person. It is so easy to objectify people that way. The person doesn't matter, it is what they represent
that they look for. It is degrading.

It is the same as if someone was being judged for their looks or their clothing or their upbringing.
People make assumptions on those things all the time. It is the same with the names. Is this person an
enemy or a soulmate? Well what do they look like? Do they come from an 'appropriate' family? Are
they in your social class or not? How much do you like them?

It is all decided before you even get to know them. It all depends on what is on the surface. He
supposes that there must be people out there that take the time to get to know the person before they
decide. They make an informed decision regarding the entire thing. But just how many? Not enough.
Not nearly enough.

Just look at Draco for a prime example. He decided Harry was his enemy within five minutes of
knowing him. Less. Now, suddenly, he has decided that Harry is his soulmate instead. Maybe he
shouldn’t be so harsh. Draco was only eleven at the time. Eleven year olds aren't always the smartest
people out there. They are just kids after all.

Then again, so was Harry. He was just as young and just as curious about his names. But he was
never given a chance to find out for himself. Draco took that from him when he decided that he hated Harry. Harry was his enemy. His rival. Someone to scorn. And all because of a name on his wrist.

It makes him think of the whispers about the names. About the rumours no one likes to think about. The theory that, if you only have one name, that the name is one and the same – both your enemy and your soulmate. Could this be true? People might wonder how you could be both, but if it is true, then he knows exactly how. Because Draco managed it. He managed it perfectly. He has made his life a living hell. And now he is determined to spend the rest of it making it better. That is the way that someone can be both.

Or that's what he thinks he wants right now. There is always the possibility that, once Draco gets to know Harry better, he will change his mind. It seems more than likely. Once that happens, he will drop the notion of them being soulmates fast enough. But until then, he is a prime of example of the forbidden theory.

Harry thinks that it is stupid that it is taboo. What does it matter? It doesn't, not really. What they should be focusing on is the 'how' of it. How did they come about? How was it decided that this was the meaning of the names? No one besides the scientists are interested in that. Which makes everyone even more stupid, as far as he is concerned.

Because the names seem like the perfect example of self fulfilling prophecy to him. They spend their whole lives looking for this one – or two – people and then find out just how much they are going to impact their lives. This is the person they fall in love with. But is it because of the name? Or because, even without it, they would have gotten together? You hate a person. But do you hate them because you truly don't like them or because of the name you bare?

Forewarned is not always the best way to go. Maybe it would be better if they didn't have the names. If they were allowed to fumble through life unaided. Wouldn't that be better? No expectations. No stress in deciding what your name means. A chance to find out what people are like for yourself. Nothing to guide you into making choices – it is you and only you. No doing something, because it has been foretold, but only because you are going to follow it in the first place.

Personally, Harry has had enough of prophecies. Hasn't his whole life been dictated by one? Voldemort killed his parents because of one. He tried to kill Harry because of one. He was defeated because he heard the prophecy and acted on it. Maybe if he had ignored it, he would still be in power.

He is sure, that if Severus and Regulus hadn't acted when they did, Harry would have been pushed to fight. He would have been the poster child for the war that would develop. He would have been expected to be the hero. To defeat Voldemort again. All because of a prophecy.

But he didn't because they broke the chain. They were able to defeat Voldemort just fine. Yes, it took years and research, but they were able to do it. Harry didn't do a thing. But he can't imagine what his life would have been like now if he had to. Or, he can. He can imagine exactly what his life would be like. He just doesn't want to.

Harry groans. So much for not thinking. His thoughts are never going to belt up this way. Not with the way they are going. At this rate, he might as well hit every depressing subject he can think of. Or most of them. There are so many, he doesn't think he would be able to cover all of them today.

Sing with me, just for today/ Maybe tomorrow, the good Lord will take you away

Take him away. That sounds like a good thing right now. That would mean that he wouldn't have to deal with any of this anymore. Sure, some of the others might be sad, but they'll get over it. He's
nothing special after all.

That is right when Severus storms into the room. And boy does he look pissed. “Mr Potter, if you are going to insist on listening to the same bloody song, then I insist you listen to something a bit better for your mental health.” He stops the gramophone, takes the record off, drops another one on and stalks out of the room.

Harry watches him so, feeling frozen. It must have taken only a minute, but he feels himself shaking as if it lasted longer. An hour – a day – a lifetime. Music begins playing without him having to start it. He misses the first few lines, but when he listens, he wonders just why Severus changed it on him. He claims Dream On isn't good, but how is this better? But then he hears and understands.

Livin' just to find emotion/ Hidin' somewhere in the night

Harry can relate to that well enough. Sometimes feeling nothing at all is worse then feeling everything. Even if you are drowning in it, you know you are alive.

Some will win/ Some will lose/ Some were born to sing the blues

Another thing that Harry can relate to. He is one of the ones who lose. Who is always losing, no matter what it seems like. He never seems to be able to check a break. That is just the way his life is. Nothing is going to change it, no matter how much he may wish.

Don't stop believin'/ Hold on to that feelin'

It's about surviving. Never giving up. Carrying on. About living life, no matter what. About the price of living, of trying to feel. Plus it is catchy as hell. He begins to hum along without quite realizing that he is doing so. Yeah, this is going to be in his head for a while.

And then he blushes, realizing that Severus must have been able to hear him today. He has been putting up with Dream On for some time now. Likely since Harry first found the song. Oh. Um, oops. No wonder he was so irritated with him. Well he hopes that he now likes this one because this is the only song on the record. And Harry can appreciate the message in this as well. Survivor. That's what the Hat asked him to choose when he was eleven. Hero or survivor.

The song going on repeat.

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Thoughts have a way of consuming you. Just like a dark wave, they rush up and over you, threatening to drag you under. Like a black cloud always hanging over your head. Be careful, lest you fall and never get back up.

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The rest of the summer follows the same. At least once a week, either Severus or Regulus takes them to the Manor to fly. Severus still forces Harry to have biweekly sessions with him. Regulus still works with Draco and makes time for him.

Draco goes between ignoring Harry and trying to be nice to him. He blows hot and cold, as if he doesn’t know how to act around him. One would think that the Malfoy heir would be more smooth
than this, but one would be wrong. Draco is a mess of a person right now. He clearly has no idea what to make of Harry, even if he is still determined to get to know him better. It is clear that he knows even less after Harry turned him down. He hasn't brought it up again, but Harry can feel his eyes on him sometimes. Watching him.

One good thing is that he finally dropped the Quidditch topic. He hasn't brought up the possibility of Harry being Seeker anymore. That isn't likely to last, but it is nice while it does. And who knows, maybe it really will? Probably not though because Quidditch takes over a person's brain. It is never gone for long.

He still either has Dream On or Don't Stop Believin' – Severus finally told him the name, although with that, he could have guessed himself – stuck in his head. Usually he finds himself accidentally humming them or tapping them on something. The table, a book, his leg, anything he can if he isn't paying attention. It's getting to be a problem. Even when he branches out to other songs to stop, he still can't. It is always one or the other.

The twins, Luna and Black continue to write. Not that Harry has figured out what to do about Black yet, if anything. Likely he won't. He will continue to stay silent and uncomfortable. Isn't that what he always does? But he doesn't want to be anywhere alone with him either. Everyone wants something. Black wants him to be the godson that he never will. Better hide that fact for as long as he can.

Thoughts and doubts still circle in his head. Panic attacks occur, although they are finally lessening. And the nightmares continued to plague his sleep, no matter what he did.

He is forbidden to use a silencing charm, so that means sleepless nights for more than just him, if he is not careful. At least he is much better at biting his hand to keep quiet now. Not that either Professor agrees with him. Apparently it is not a healthy response. He is just trying to let them sleep. No reason for them to deal with every one of his dumb problems.

Before he knew it, it was time to return to Hogwarts.

Drown in the noise of life.

The first sign that something is wrong started at the train station. Severus and Regulus dropped them off and then flooed to Hogwarts. The twins and Luna met him and they secured their own compartment. Draco had nodded at him and went off to find his friends. Nothing unusual. Harry wasn't expecting anything else. He very much doubted he was going to see much of Draco from now on.

It is a quiet ride. Sound from the other carriages float over, it all a dull noise. Inside Harry and Luna sit on one side and the twins sit on another. They catch up on everything that they didn't write in their letters. They get snacks from the trolley and eat lunch. Harry deliberately avoids mentioning Draco too much. If they find out about the fight, they are going to be terribly protective. He doesn't want that. Not now. Now he wants space to think about things.

They end up talking about music – both Wizarding and Muggle. As it turns out, the twins' father is big on anything Muggle. He knew that of course. They have mentioned it before. For all they
complain about their siblings, they are a close family. But he never asked if that meant they knew anything too. But they do know a fair bit of music. To none of their surprise, Luna knows all the obscure bands. He can't even say if they are good or not because he can't even begin to guess the genre.

It passes the time nicely. Most of the time he stays quiet, letting the others talk instead. He wedges himself into the corner and lets everything flow around him. There is a strange tension in the air. One he has never felt before. He doesn't know what it means, but it makes him wary. Tension like this usually leads to change. And change is not always a good thing. It can be, sure. But not always. It is always best to prepare yourself, just in case.

Add to that, it seems people are paying more attention to him than usual. The whispers always follow him, for one reason or another. But they are extra loud right now. It's not hard to figure out why they are now again. It is Voldemort of course. Voldemort's final defeat. And by someone who wasn't Harry, in addition to that. How shocking.

He snorts to himself. For all the they ridicule him, they still see him as a symbol. As their Saviour. The one who is supposed to protect them. Forget that, most of the time, they are convinced that he is evil because he is Slytherin. Or he is a disappointment because he isn't always in the limelight. Or a number of other things that means he doesn't meet their expectations.

If anyone had asked him, he would have said that they were being stupid. For one thing, he never asked for this. He never wanted the fame and the title and everything that came with it. All he wants is a place to belong. For another thing, how do they really think a baby managed to defeat a fully grown and trained wizard? Never mind how powerful and terrible he is supposed to be. Babies are good at three things – sleeping, eating and wetting their nappy. They don't go around defeating Dark Lords.

Too bad no one ever asked him.

He hopes this passes soon. He really hates being stared at. It makes him nervous. And it makes it even harder for him to eat. He already has a problem with that to begin with. Severus is keeping him on his potion regiment to help him build up to where he should be, growth wise. Missing meals doesn't help with that. And it makes him cranky.

Harry thinks that's a good one. It effects Severus' mood more than it does his own. And it's his body. But Severus is funny that way. So is Regulus. As if it matters that Harry gets three full meals a day. And that is able to get a good night's sleep. That he doesn't have to work until he drops and beyond. That he is able to learn freely. That he knows he has people – adults – he can count on. As if all of that matters. As if he matters. Weird.

He ends up drifting off to sleep for a bit. Surprisingly no nightmares wake him up. Instead, Fred gently shakes him awake when they are close. Harry stretches, feeling a bit better after that. Amazing what some peaceful sleep can do to a person.

They change and exit the train among the rest of the rush trying to get out as quickly as possible. The Hogwarts might be tradition and an interesting experience, but it is also a long ride. When Harry sees the carriages, he freezes. There are... things pulling them. Things he has never seen before. He always thought that magic moved them, but obviously not. He's not sure what they are.

Some kind of horse, but with a black, leathery skin. He can see their bones sticking out from where he is standing. Great bat wings are folded up against their backs. What...?

“They're Thestrals,” Luna says, coming up beside him, “Only people who have seen someone die in
front of them can see them.”

Oh. Well that would explain it. He has seen enough death at the end of the last school year. Cedric. The Death Eaters that didn't make it. Voldemort. Part of him wonders why he couldn't see them before, since his Mum died right in front of him as a baby. But maybe that doesn't count. Maybe he was too young then. And he only remembered that a few years ago. Now... now the memory of it is all but burned into his mind.

“They have such a bad reputation,” she continues, “but really, they're just misunderstood. Really they're quite gentle.” She walks over confidentiality to one and begins to pet it. “Her name is Cecil. Come join me. She likes behind her ears.”

Harry goes over cautiously and strokes the spot behind Cecil's ears. He thought that was cats that liked this spot scratched. Or was that dogs? Either way, apparently Thestrals like it as well. Or this one does. She snorts into Harry's hair. He lets out a light laugh in surprise.

His back itches and he knows that there are people watching him. Trying to ignore them, he focuses on the skin under his hand. It is warmer than he thought it would be. Softer too, instead of the harsh leather it looks like. She's nice to pet. Soothing. He has the oddest desire to hide himself behind her wings, away from all the stares and whispers. Would anyone be able to see him then? Or would he vanish, hiding behind something they can't see.

Briefly he wonders who it was that Luna saw die, but he doesn't ask. It seems rude. Too personal as well. He wouldn't want people asking him either.

“There is a herd of them that live in the Forbidden Forest. I like to visit them when I can. You can join me, if you like,” she offers.

“Maybe,” Harry says tentatively. That doesn't sound so bad.

Fred and George come up on either side of them, throwing their arms around them.

“Why Luna bell,”

“Going out into the Forbidden Forest are you?”

“Breaking the rules?”

“Showing the man?”

“We're so proud.” George wipes an imaginary tear from his eye.

“Our little rebel.” Fred copies the gesture.

Harry fights a smile. Typical Gred and Forge. They really do know how to lighten the mood. Always joking until you piss them off. Then you might not be dead, but you'll wish that you were.

“If you two are done talking to the ponies,”

“It is time to enter your humble transport,”

“Before we have to walk in with all the firsties.”

They all get into the carriage and set off. Harry watches from the window as the village falls away and Hogwarts slowly comes into view. It is still a breathtaking sight, even after all of this time. Even with everything that has happened and all that he has endured, he still loves this castle. Not for the
people in it, not for the memories it holds, but for the castle itself. There is something truly magical about it. Something wonderful that he has never felt anywhere else. Almost as if it is alive.

Who knows, maybe it really is. After all these decades and centuries of being soaked in so much magic, maybe it picked some up. Maybe enough to give it sentience. Maybe enough to give it a personality. Who knows. Everyone likes to say that anything is possible with magic. That isn't exactly true, but that doesn't stop them though.

Parting ways in the Great Hall, Harry goes to his usual seat by himself near the younger years. They care less if he sits near them then the older years. They always tend to be more hostile. But as he does, he notices something. There seems to be a greater divide among the groups right now. And they are different. Slytherins like to have a hierarchy to their seating that determines social status. It looks as if it has changed. And changed drastically at that.

Just because Harry isn't a part of any doesn't mean that he is oblivious to them. He knows what they stand for, if he doesn't know all of the people in them. It is The Game after all. Most Slytherins revel in it. Not all, there are some that don't care. Some that don't find it fun. But the majority do.

“Can we sit here?” a voice startles Harry out of his thoughts. Draco.

He looks up to find that he, Nott and Zabini are standing in front of him. He is minorly surprised that Goyle and Crabbe aren't with them, but he had seen those two sitting by themselves earlier. Neither seemed to care. He nods and looks away.

“Thank you,” Draco says. He sits down beside him while Nott and Zabini go around so that they can sit across from him.

Harry doesn't say anything, but he is shocked. For one thing, he truly thought Draco would forget about him once they got to Hogwarts. For another, if they are sitting with him then things must be changing more than he realized. Sitting with him before has always been social suicide. Now, for them to be doing so willingly? Things must be dire indeed.

“So Potter, I heard you spent the summer with Professor Black and Professor Snape,” Zabini says.

Harry starts slightly, not having expected any of them to talk to him. Just because they were sitting with him doesn't mean anything. He nods cautiously.

Zabini smirks. “Bet that was fun with our Princess over here.”

“Oh belt up Zabini,” Draco grumbles.

Nott is watching the rest of the table, a blank look on his face. As if he is assessing the situation and deciding if he really cares or not. It isn't disgust or arrogance, it's indifference. From the looks of it, it's not likely he does.

That doesn't surprise Harry overly much. Nott is as much of a loner as Harry himself is. But while Harry is by circumstances, Nott is by choice. He never really seems to care if he has anyone else with him or not. In fact, he might prefer that he didn't. A lone wolf, as they say.

Harry has never had any problems with him before. It's not because Nott likes him. Or because he can't be cruel – he can, he has seen it before. It's just that he can't be bothered to put the effort into it. As Harry said, indifferent. Bored even. As if he is waiting for Hogwarts to be over so he can move on to something interesting.

You certainly wouldn't know by looking at him that his House is trying to push him out. Why he
even bothered to join Draco and Zabini is beyond him. Most people tend to forget that he is even in
the room when he is quiet enough. And Nott is always quiet.

Harry thinks that if things were different, he would have been like Nott too. If he ever had the
opportunity to simply fade into the background. For everyone to forget about him. To have them let
go of their ridiculous expectations. They always have them, even when he is a disappointment. Even
when his House isolated him, he was still being targeted. He just wants the chance to be himself
without anyone always watching him. Too bad that is not likely to ever happen.

“It's all so ridiculous,” Zabini says, complaining. “All this maneuvering for something that doesn't
even involve us. It isn't our problem no matter what people think. This war is something that
happened before our generation. That everyone cares so much about it now is pointless. There is
bound to be some backlash of course, but no need to get this worked up about it.”

“Tell that to the dead,” Draco says with a growl in his voice. He still isn't taking his Father's death
very well, although it is getting better now, “Tell it to the ones in Azkaban. Tell that to my
godfathers. Just because the war doesn't touch you, doesn't mean it's true for all of us.” Oh and
there's that famous temper of his, rearing up. Good to know that it comes out with his friends as well,
not just at Harry.

Zabini shrugs, not looking the least bit repentant over it.

Harry, for his part, is also darkly amused by his statement. 'Something that happened before our
generation' indeed. Tell that to Voldemort, all the times he went after him. To them, the war may
have no effect, but to Harry, it was a very real thing. He was born into it and it is only thanks to his
two Professors that it is ended. He has no doubts that it would have continued, with him in the
center, if not.

He has always been a child of war.

Their attention is drawn away as Dumbledore calls for everyone's attention and the Sorting begins.
He watches as always, not all that interested, but still paying some attention. It's not as if he has
anything else to do, is there?

He notices that all the kids who are Sorted into Slytherin look nervous. Scared, almost. Well, it
would appear that the stories have already reached them. Stories that are likely even worse than
when Harry was first Sorted. None of them look happy to be where they are. In fact, a couple look
as if they are going to cry. He could almost feel sorry for them. But Slytherin take care of their own.
They will be fine.

He feels a brief pang, but he shakes it off. No use in thinking about it now. Sure, it would have been
nice to be accepted as an actual Slytherin, but there is nothing he can do to change that now. He
made his choice when he was eleven. Survivor or hero. He chose survivor. If given the choice again,
he would still choose survivor. That is just who he is.

Throughout the meal, Zabini keeps trying to have a conversation with him. Harry answers his
questions, but only sparingly. He isn't sure why he is doing this. Why he suddenly seems so
interested. What his motive is. There has to be something. Just because Zabini has never been one of
the students to mock or hurt him, doesn't mean that he is a friend. He's not sure if he is anyone's
friend actually. He always seems so aloof at times. Not like Nott who is uninterested, but still apart
from the others. Blasé.

Sure, he gets along with Draco, Crabbe and Goyle and he is sometimes with Parkinson. But does
that really mean anything? You can be around people and not like them. Or is he simply so reserved
that he is still that way among friends as well. Maybe it more that he just goes with the flow of things instead of removing himself from it entirely. He doesn't know.

What he does know is that Draco is glaring at the both of them when he does. Every time Zabini says something, he glares. Every time Harry answers, it gets more intense. He is surprised that he does not burst into flames by the end of meal. Draco certainly tried hard enough. Zabini, for his part, seems more amused by it than anything.

Nott is watching all of this with those blue eyes of his, silent. Judging the situation. Harry wonders if he would tell him what he thinks about it if he asked. Because he certainly doesn't know what to. Jealousy? Possessiveness? Something else? He doesn't know. It seems like he hardly knows anything when it comes to social interactions. And sometimes it seems as if he will never figure it out either.

That's just his luck after all.

Just his life.

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The only certainty in this world is that everything will change.
Harry is right. The tension in the air only increases as time goes on. Groups are arranging and rearranging themselves according to some social order only they know about. They stick viciously together and regard anyone outside their group with suspicion. Nowhere is safe from them. Not the common room, not the Great Hall, not the classrooms. Everywhere the students are, so are their groups and the tension.

It is enough to choke a person. To make them drown in it.

Harry had already felt like that before. Like he was drowning in the crowd and no one cared. But now it is even worse. Of course he isn't included in a group. Why would he be? No one ever liked him before so why would that change now? It hasn't and it isn't likely going to. Not with the way everyone is making assumptions at him.

He is the Boy-Who-Lived, he was suppose to be the Wizarding World's darling. He was suppose to be their Saviour. But he is neither. Instead he is a disappointment and a failure and a Slytherin. Everything he is not suppose to be, according to them. He didn't do his job – killing Voldemort. That is enough for some people to turn their backs on him. But neither did he support the Dark Lord. That makes another group turn their noses up at him. The remaining groups just don't care about him. They have no reason to.

And if that wasn't bad enough, House rivalries seem to be at their top peak. Especially between Slytherin and Gryffindor. It has always been bad before of course. The destined enemies – good vs evil. It is only natural some say. It is all a bunch of rubbish, but it is also rubbish that everyone listens to. Before it was names and pranks. Now curses and hexes and everything else is being thrown in between them. It is as if it is another war. One between the students instead of the adults who started it. It is already to the point where they are being sent to the Hospital Wing. Not to St Mungo's, not yet. But with the way things are going, it only seems to be a matter of time.

Yet another war Harry seems to be stuck in the middle of. He doesn't want to fight. All he wants is a chance to live his life in peace. But since when does he ever get what he wishes for? Never, that's when.

The lines seem to have been drawn when he wasn't looking and once again, he is excluded. It is a good thing he knew better than to hope now. This might have hurt otherwise. Made his chest ache and his heart bleed. As if, he feels strangely numb to it all. A resigned acceptance that of course he is still an outsider. He has been one all his life. Why would that change now?

And if that thought sometimes make him gasp for breath. If it makes his heart beat too fast and his vision blur. Well. He is use to it by now. He is far too use to being unwanted.

Draco still insists on trying to talk to him. He hasn't made the mistake of asking him on another date or bringing up Quidditch – yet – but he seems determined to stick close. He is sure that if someone were to ask him, he would say that Harry is a part of their group. As if he could ever fit in with
Draco, Nott and Zabini. As if he could ever be accepted.

But that is the world according to Draco. Harry sees the group differently. Nott only comes around when it seems to suit him. Otherwise he is off by himself somewhere. Still a lone wolf and still unbothered by it. Zabini is friendly with Draco, but sometimes it seems as if he is only humoring him. Other times he does seem, if not happy then relaxed, with him.

Zabini is another problem in and of himself. He is another one who is talking to Harry as well. But unlike Draco, he has no idea why. He knows Draco feels some obligation now that he thinks they are soulmates. But Zabini? Why is he doing this? What does he want? Everyone wants something. What is it?

It doesn't help that Draco always turns back into a prat when he sees them talking. Like it matters who he can talk to. Like he has some say in it or anything. Like Harry is actually enjoying himself or some sort of rot. No. No he isn't. He tolerates it, just like he tolerates Draco, most of the time. Only there is more tension in him when Zabini is around. His muscles ache and his legs twitch to be away. Still, he stays and listens. It's not as if he hasn't been through worse after all.

Still, he doesn't like it when Draco acts like a prat. It brings back all the memories he is trying to avoid. All the things that make it so hard to be around him when he is being nice. Maybe he shouldn't forget. Maybe the reminder is a good thing. But Severus says you can't dwell on the sadness all the time. You really will drown then. From the look on his face, he knows exactly what he is talking about. Harry wonders, but he doesn't ask.

The only good thing about the school year thus far are his friends. His friends who could care less about all the social reordering. His friends who stick by him no matter what everyone else says. Sometimes he wonders why. There is nothing special about him. In fact, he is the opposite of it. But still they stand by him.

It is the only relief he gets anymore. The only time he doesn't feel as if he is going to itch right out of his skin from everything. The only time he feels somewhat at peace. Never wholly. Never that. But still, he has it in some measure.

And then the Professors decide that they have had enough and take matters into their own hands.

Professor McGonagall is the one who starts it. She announces that for the next project, she will be pairing up one Slytherin and one Gryffindor to work together. She has already chosen the pairs. And it is a term long project that will count for half of their grade. Chaos reigns for a brief moment before she calls them all back into order again.

Harry waits in dread. Nothing good can come of this. No matter who he gets paired with, it is sure to be a disaster. If it is anyone like Weasley – the twin’s younger brother – he is going to end up in the Hospital Wing himself. If it is anyone else, well, he is still a Slytherin. That is enough to outweigh any of the positives they might see in him. Not that there is may to see to begin with.

“Granger and Potter,” Professor McGonagall calls.

Harry's heart sinks. No, he won't end up cursed, but this isn't going to be much better. There isn't anything wrong with Granger per se, but she is still so aggressive with her knowledge. So eager to prove that she belongs here, that she has a right to this as well, that she has a habit of isolating herself. She is too strong for most of the students. He thinks she might be too strong for some of the Professors as well. And now they have to work together.

There is a scramble when everyone rearranges themselves. And grumbling. There is quite a bit of
that. He stays right where he is. Granger marches right over to him and puts her bag down with a thud. “I am not going to fail this assignment just because I now have to work with someone else. Honestly, of all the years, our OWL year! I cannot afford to fail this year and I won't let you or anyone else drag me down. You are going to do your share of the work and do it well. Understand?”

Harry blinks up at her and nods.

She sighs as she sits down. “At least I didn't get stuck with a bigot,” she says, taking her books out of her bag, “Now do you have any ideas for the project. Because I was thinking, I have a few that could work out well. What about,” She then proceeds to tell Harry about the ‘few ideas’ she has. A few being ten. Off the top of her head.

Harry listens and nods when appropriate. She might not have gotten stuck with a bigot, but Harry got stuck with a whirlwind. Part of him is expecting to be picked up and thrown out of the room with her determined enthusiasm. And this is just the beginning. How is he going to survive an entire term of this? She is going to eat him alive.

Frankly Harry doesn't care what subject they pick. Transfiguration isn't his favorite subject, so he doesn't have much of an opinion. Plus Granger is likely to be happier if she is the one in charge. A happy Granger is only a good thing at this point.

“I assume everything is going well then?” Professor McGonagall asks as she comes up to their table.

Granger nods. “Oh yes Professor, I was just telling Potter here what I think are some good options to pick from.” She is practically bouncing in her seat. Obviously she has already forgotten it is a Slytherin she is being forced to work with.

“I see. And does Mr Potter have any opinions of his own? Or have you forgotten to breathe in between sentences again?” she chides gently.

“Oh,” Granger gasps, “I'm sorry. Do you have any ideas?”

Harry shrugs as he looks down at the desk.

“Mr Potter?” Professor McGonagall asks, “Remember, this is for the both of you.” She sounds gentler now, less stern. Almost as if she pities him.

He despises pity. It never does a person any good, does it? He shrugs again, “Animangi?” he offers, thinking of Black and some of the stories he has been told.

Grangers eyes light up. “Oh animangi! That is a good one. So much better than the comparative properties of conjuring vs transformation. Oh, how about animangi vs metamorphmagi? Or animagni vs animal transformation?”

Harry looks up and yes, Professor McGonagall is most definitely amused. “I see you have been listening to your godfather then. He and your Father were quite spectacular indeed, even if they did give me one too many of my grey hairs. Please do remember not to follow in his footsteps too well. Now carry on. And please remember to breathe every once and a while Ms Granger.” She walks away, onto the next pair.

Harry could almost hate her for that. For assuming he would be anything like Black. For assuming that he has that big of an influence on him. For always mentioning his Dad and never his Mum. For thinking his parents – or godparents – have any kind of effect on him.

“ What did she mean? Does that mean they were good at transfiguration? Wait, does that mean they
were animangi?"

And most of all, he could almost hate his Professor for saying that in front of Granger.

Unfortunately, Professor McGonagall is only the first to begin the trend. Professor Flitwick has them working in groups every other class period. Fortunately the groups change and there is no added pressure as in Transfiguration. Severus flat out refuses to try it, saying it is a disaster waiting to happen. Harry has never been more thankful for him than right in that moment. Nor does Regulus or Professor Sprout. Not that their subjects have much to do with working together. So at least there is that.

But then their newest DADA Professor, Auror Graham, announces that he is going to do the same. They have a project of their choice, worth a third of their grade. Only this one is going to stretch out the entire year. And it has to be of practical use.

“Remember, I'm not grading on how successful you are. It could be a complete failure and you could still get full credit. What I am looking for here is creativity, drive and a logical reason behind everything you do.”

The class groans. Up until now, Professor Graham had been the favorite Professor. He was interesting, he taught them practical things that they could use in the real world, he didn't drone on and on about obscure theory before ever letting them pick up their wands. Best of all, to the others, he was an Auror, so he was positively brill.

Best of all for Harry is the fact that he never signals him out. He never treats him specially, whether that be positively or negatively. He is just another student to him. He doesn't have Voldemort in the back of his head. He isn't oddly obsessed with Harry for being the Boy-Who-Lived. He isn't a long lost friend of his parents. And he isn't a Death Eater in league with Voldemort. Auror Graham is just another Professor.

Although he might lose that favorite title now that he has done this. No one is very happy about what is being done. They may think it's helping tensions, but it isn't. Maybe in time, but for now it isn't. In fact there are cases where this is making it worse.

“Come now,” he calls, smiling slightly, “think of this as an exercise for the real world. Eventually you are going to have to work with someone that you do not like. It is a fact of life. Best get use to it now when the consequences are rather low.”

That doesn't help.

“I'll even let you choose your own partners,” he adds, “but remember, they must be from another House. If you get yourselves sorted then I won't assign them. Go.”

Well, that helps a little bit.

There is a mad scramble to find someone they can at least tolerate for the rest of the year. Oh Merlin, the rest of the year. This is going to be a nightmare. He refuses to get stuck with Granger again. With his luck, she will want to since they are already partners. That way they can work on both projects at the same time. No. Merlin no. She is already driving him nuts as is. He sees her glance his way consideringly. That is enough to get him moving.

Harry gets out of his seat and marches determinedly to where Longbottom is sitting. If he is going to be stuck with a Gryffindor, then he is going to be stuck with the most tolerable one. He glares at any of the others that come near him. Oh no. He has chosen and he is not giving up. Not for anything
right now. Surprisingly the glare seems to be effective. Certainly there are those that jump when they see it. Huh.

“You look like Professor Snape when you glare like that,” Longbottom says softly.

He does? Well that makes sense, he supposes. He has spent enough time with Severus after all. He feels oddly... proud that he does. Proud that he is able to look like Hogwarts most hated Professor. Not that that is the way Harry thinks of him of course. But that doesn't make it any less true. No, Severus is... not good. He could never be that. He is still too cranky and sharp, even at home. But there is also more to him there. His edges are less sharp. Not good, but... neutral. Safe. Or as safe as any adult can be. Which isn't much, but it could be so much worse.

“Everyone have someone?” Professor Graham asks, “Yes? Good. Take this class period to hash things out. Next class will be as per scheduled. Remember, we still have material to cover for your OWLs.”

Another round of groans fill the air, but then the rumble of discussion begins.

“Do you really want to be my partner that badly?” Longbottom asks curiously, frowning, “The Squib?”

Harry scowls at that. “You are the only tolerable Gryffindor there is. Power isn't the only thing that matters.” Not when he has always been powerless. When he is trapped in situations where magic never seems to help. When the only power Harry has is the terrible one.

Longbottom's frown deepens. “That sounds odd coming from a Slytherin.”

Harry shrugs. “According to my House I don't belong there anyways, so it hardly matters what else I do, does it?”

A look of understanding passes over Longbottom's face. Not pity. Not sympathy, but understanding. As if he knows exactly what Harry is talking about. From what Harry has seen over the years, he probably does. He nods.

Longbottom nods back. That out of the way, he asks, “Any ideas on what to do?”

Harry hesitates. He doesn't want to sound like Granger, taking over the conversation. Nor does he want to sound too ambitious in this. Choosing something useful is one thing. Choosing something that will likely be over their heads is another. And really, how useful would it truly be? How many people actually have a run in with Dementors? But he can't help consider it. Still. “You?” he asks. But Longbottom shakes his head.

Still he hesitates. What if? What if? 'What if's are one of the many banes of his life.

“How about it boys, you seem rather quiet over here,” Professor Graham says as he approaches them, “Any ideas yet?”

Harry glances up at him, with his messy blonde hair and smiling green eyes, before looking down again. But he obviously didn't do it fast enough.

“Yes Potter, you have something? Come now,” he says when Harry doesn't answer right away, “there is no such thing as a stupid question.”

Harry can't help the disdainful look he gives his Professor then. No such thing as a stupid question?
Ha! That is one of the top lies adults like to tell their children. It is right after 'words can never hurt you' and 'you can tell me anything'. Lies. It is always a lie.

That makes Professor Graham just laugh however. “Well there is certainly no question about who your Head of House is then. I believe he just gave me that same look yesterday.”

Something inside of Harry flares.

“I will leave you to it then, but I am asking every pair for either a topic or a top three list when you leave.” He walks away.

Longbottom looks at him. “I promise not to laugh. It can’t be any worse than what I would come up with. DADA isn’t my strong suit.”

Well, there was a reason he wanted to work with Longbottom after all. He’s not only the most tolerable, he’s the nicest. The softest. That will kill you in the real world, but it will help Harry here. He takes the plunge. “Dementors,” he says, “I want to find another way to chase off Dementors than the Patronus Charm.”

Longbottom doesn’t laugh, like he promised, but he also doesn’t look enthused. In fact, he might look at Harry as if he is crazy. Maybe he is. “That sounds...advanced,” he says slowly, “How? Do you know something about spell crafting then?”

Harry shakes his head. “I was thinking a potion,” he admits.

Longbottom gives a bitter snort. “Potions is my worst subject. Surely you haven’t missed my regularly melted cauldrons?”

“But you are best at Herbology. Top of our year. And I’m decent at Potions.” Severus seemed moderately satisfied with him after all, during his summer sessions, “And if we ask, maybe Professor Snape and Professor Sprout will give us credit for this as well.”

“But how?” Longbottom asks.

Harry shrugs, feeling like an idiot now. He never should have said anything. He knew it was a dumb idea. Idiot. Why is he always so much of a damn idiot? “I'm not sure. It's a stupid idea anyways. What is your idea?”

Longbottom must have read something in his expression because he shakes his head. Or maybe he read the blankness somehow. Fred has always told him that he gets blank and remote when he is too hard on himself. Like he is shutting himself away. Luna mentions that he is trying too hard to hide from the Hook Tailed Goobers. They are the things that get in your head and gunk all of your thoughts up. Shutting down like that only makes them worse. Apparently.

“No,” he says, rather insistently, “no tell me more about it.”

Harry looks at him.

“Tell me,” Longbottom repeats.

“It has to be something that produces strong happiness and is able to convert that happiness into power. That's what a Patronus Charm does. It takes your strong happiness and channels it into the spell. But not everyone can make one. So if there were a...something like cheering potion that can harness the cheer it gives you and drive them off. Or surround you like an aurora, so that it can't get to you.”
“But isn't the cheer that potion make artificial? Would that still work?”

“Maybe, I don't know.” Harry shrugs again. “Like I said, it's just some stupid idea.”

“I can't produce a Patronus,” Longbottom says, as if he is admitting a secret. “Power isn't always the problem with magic.”

Oh. Oh maybe he is admitting a secret. But why? Why tell him something like that? To a Slytherin of all people. That seems even more foolish than Harry's idea is. Then again, maybe he is telling Harry that this is more self serving than he realized. He can't cast a Patronus, so he needs some way to protect himself against Dementors. Not that a person is likely to run into them, but you never know. Just look at his third year after all.

Then again, maybe it's neither of those things. Gryffindors have a different way of thinking after all. He remembers how appalled Fred and George were, when he faced the Basilisk to pay his debt of companionship to them. How they didn't understand until they asked Regulus. So maybe it is that. A Gryffindor way of reassuring him instead of a Slytherin way.

“How are we going to practice though? We aren't going to have class time to do it.”

“I can ask Sev- Professor Snape if we can practice in one of the classrooms.” He blushes horribly at the mistake he just made. He can't believe he almost said that. Yes, Severus said to call him by his first name, but only in private. And certainly not in school. He seems to be determined to be a true idiot today it would seem.

Fortunately Longbottom doesn't comment. “He would let us? Let me?”

He hums at that. It's a fair question after all. But Harry can't help but smirk. Just a little bit. “I was going to ask Professor Black first.” There, no slip up this time. Good. Keep his tongue in his head.

Longbottom blinks in wonder. “Is that how it works in Slytherin?”

No, actually it isn't. In fact, they go out of their way to show that you cannot manipulate them like that, just because they are partners. Retribution when they find out is always ugly. But Harry had found out that it is possible, if done right, over the summer. He hadn't even been trying to. He had made some small comment to Regulus about wanting to try a different potion. The next time Severus dragged him down to the lab, that was the potion they did.

He never took advantage of it of course. He's stupid, but he isn't that stupid after all. And what he is going to do now is only going to do that a little bit. He is supposed to talk to Regulus that night and he always asks about his classes. If he so casually mentions it then -- and he would likely anyways -- and then ask Severus the next class period. Well. That's not really manipulation, is it? There is nothing to say he has to agree. And it isn't as if he is asking Regulus to ask for him. But maybe. Maybe. You never know.

Frankly he isn't sure why it worked the first time. Maybe it was only a fluke. Maybe it was a one time thing. He doesn't know. But maybe if Severus hears it from Regulus first, he will be less likely to blow up on Harry when he does ask. Maybe. Or maybe he will yell more at Harry being so dumb as to even think about asking.

Maybe.

But then he has had adults mad at him his entire life. Angry, dismissing, uncaring. His Uncle loves to scream in his face when he is in the mood. His face always gets too red and spit starts to fly. Severus, while cutting and cruel, isn't as bad as his Uncle. Not to Harry, anyways. He is sure other people
would disagree.

Still it's his life isn't it? It is what he is use to.

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The joys of new experiences in life. Or that's what they always say anyways. Sometimes they are good, sometimes they are not. It all depends. New isn't always better. But, more to the point, just who is 'everyone' and how do they supposedly know all of this anyhow?

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The next Potion class, Severus calls for Harry and Longbottom to stay after before Harry gets a chance to ask to talk to him when class ends. A quick look at Longbottom tells him the he is a bundle of nerves over this. Harry isn't much better, but he knows not to show it. Never show weakness to the enemy. That only shows them that they have hurt you.

“Come,” Severus motions to the front of the room when the rest of the students have gone. “Now,” he pulls out a piece of parchment. Their proposal. “Professor Graham has given me a copy of a very interesting project. It says here that the two of you want to try to create a potion that defends against Dementors. Correct?”

“Yes Sir,” Harry answers. Longbottom looks too green to do it himself. That's fine, Harry is use to this. He's not afraid. Well, not of what Longbottom is anyways.

“Very well then,” he nods, “If the two of you succeed, I will personally see that both of you pass your OWL with an O. More than that, I would be prepared to receive quite a bit from attention of this, especially from the Aurors.”

Harry looks up at him in astonishment. What? He can see Longbottom doing the same. A passing grade and recognition from the Aurors? All for a stupid idea? But Severus obviously doesn't think it is stupid. Nor does Professor Graham. Not if they are talking like this.

“I will allow you to brew with supervision,” he stresses, “when you have reached that stage of your work. Understand?”

They both nod.

“Good. Now leave before you are late to your next class.”

They run.

The Professors must be really serious about this because the next Herbology class, they have a similar conversation with Professor Sprout.

“It sounds like a wonderful idea boys. Tricky of course, very tricky, but it would showcase some amazing skill if you are able to. Even if you are not, I can still give partial credit for it.” She smiles that them. “Any one who can do this will show that they really know their plants. Herbology is a big part of Potions after all. Maybe even enough to help secure an apprenticeship.”

Longbottom beams at that. It is clear that that was added just for him. Huh. Harry knew that
Longbottom loved Herbology, but he didn't realize he loved it that much. Anyone who cares to look can see that. But to be a Herbology Master? He would be good at it though. It fits when Harry thinks about it. Like he was made for it.

Not like Harry, who wasn't made for anything. He is dreading the career talk they are suppose to get this year. What does he see his future job as? Ha! Some days he can barely see his future at all. And it isn't as if he is good at anything either. It is going to be a nightmare.

All of the usual jobs always sound so flashy or so boring. Harry does not want something like the former. For one thing, he doubts he would be good at it. For another, the last thing he wants is to bring more attention to himself. As for the latter, well, he shouldn't complain if he ends up getting something that doesn't have any excitement to it. When it happens, he should likely be happy that someone wants to hire him at all. He has no real skills and his name is more of a hindrance than anything.

Future? What future can he possibly have?

It is thoughts like this that make Severus' face go pinched if Harry ever mentions them out loud. He has been encouraging Harry to find his skills – he insists that even the most dense of dunderheads have them – and to imagine a future for himself. It doesn't have to be anything elaborate. But it has to be something. Picture it as it will really happen. What would he want it to include? Who would it include? Where is he living? Where does he work? Any pets? Hobbies? Stuff like that.

Harry always hates to tell him that he can't see himself anywhere. He vaguely imagines that the twins and Luna might be there. If they don't forget about him when they graduate. If she doesn't find someone better to be friends with. A real person, not a Freak. Maybe even Regulus and Severus, if they don't tire of him.

Pets? What use is a pet to him? Sure, people use them for companionship as well as other useful things, like delivering mail or such. But with Harry's luck any pet he would have would hate him. Hobbies? Things he likes to do? Well he supposes he likes to fly. He can add that to the list, which is progress from the nothing he had before. But anything else? What use are hobbies when you are trying to survive? Does reading count if you are doing so because you are desperate?

Where would he live? He has no idea. Maybe if he ever lived in the city, he could lose himself in the crowd. But if he lived out in the country, he could find some peace somehow. Then again, in a city there are people. And people as a general rule don't forget him. They use him and mock him and blatantly shun him. And in the country, it will likely become apparent just how alone he is. Who would want to visit him there?

His blank stare always makes Severus sigh in frustration. Even when he hands Harry a list of things he might want, he can't decide. Can't imagine. He's never been able to choose anything for himself thus far. Not really. Will that change when he graduates? Will he be abandoned then? Or will someone else continue to rule his life, whether he likes it or not?

So no, he isn't looking forward to the career talk. Not at all.

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The future can look bleak at times. Lonely and pointless. Why bother to try at all when all you will get is failure? Why waste the effort?
Harry is back in the graveyard, tied to the stone. He struggles to move, but he can't. The ropes are too tight. He is having a hard time feeling his hands, which is a bad sign. Once again Pettigrew cuts his arm. Once again the creepy Babymort is put in the cauldron to be resurrected. Once again there is a bright light. But instead of Voldemort rising again, out steps Tom Riddle.

What? No. Harry begins to struggle even more. But it is no use. He is trapped.

“Hello Harry Potter,” he greets. He stalks forward, like a cat intent on its prey.

And that is just what Harry feels like too. Prey. Isn't he always the prey, in one way or another? Why should this be any different? He shakes his head. He doesn't want to be here. He doesn't want to be here. He would wish he were home instead, but he has no home. So he just wishes himself away instead. Of course it doesn't work.

“Aren't you going to greet your soulmate Harry?” Riddle asks as he stops in front of him.

“You are not my soulmate,” Harry protests, but it sounds weak, even to his own ears.

“Who else then? You bare my name, do you not?” He caresses his name on Harry's wrists. It is then he realizes that his bands are gone. The names are visible for the world to see.

He shivers at the touch. Somehow, although his hands are mostly numb now, he can feel it. It burns, as if fire is being traced over it.

“Yes, that's right Harry. Feel it.” Riddle says, leaning in so their bodies are mere centimeters apart now, “Feel my touch. Know that it is right. That I am the one who is destined for you. Are you not marked by my hand?” The other hand, the one not on his name, comes up and strokes Harry's scar.

Harry cries out, feeling that fire on his forehead now as well. It burns. It burns so much. He gasps a sob, but no tears come. He isn't aloud to cry.

“Do we not share my soul through this? Do not fight it Harry. You are mine.” Riddle sounds possessively delighted by this. His voice is like dark chocolate – enough to melt on your tongue, but still bitter.

Harry shakes his head, both to deny it and to try and get that hand off of him.

“Shh, my one. Relax. Besides, who else could it be? The little brat? The one who has tormented you for years?” Even Riddle's laugh is strangely seductive. As if everything about him is meant to tempt.

Well Harry isn't tempted. He is in pain and he is afraid and all he wants is to be anywhere but here right now. Even the Dursleys would be better, which is something Harry would never think he would say. It is trading one hell for another, but at least they are known. They are a lesser evil, compared to the boy in front of him.

“No, that's right. Not him. Not Draco Malfoy. It is Tom Riddle instead. It is me. Face it Harry, I am your past, present and future. I am your soulmate. You belong to me. The sooner you accept that, the happier you will be. Isn't that what you want? To be happy?”

Harry shakes his head. No. No it isn't true. It isn't. Except the part where it is.
You are mine Harry Potter. I know it. You know it. And soon, the whole world will know it too. Accept me and I will give you everything you ever wanted.

No!

Harry jerks awake, the taste of blood in his mouth. He has bitten his hand again, to keep quiet. Not that it matters here, in his dorm with the silencing spells layered around him. But he takes his hand from his mouth and looks at it. Not so bad. He casts a quick cleaning spell on it, then on his mouth. The taste fades until it is just an echo.

A faint feel of satisfaction fills him as he looks at the bite. Good. He did good, keeping quiet. No matter what Regulus and Severus say, he has to keep quiet. No one wants a burden waking them up. No one wants a Freak.

But a violent shudder runs through him then. The strength of it is about enough to knock him over. The chill that follows seems to be set into his very bones. Not even a warming charm helps. Nor do the blankets. Riddle's words are in too deep for anything to help.

'You are mine,' he had said. As if he was stating a fact. As if he were coming to claim Harry.

'You are mine. And soon the whole world will know it too.'

Harry shivers, the feeling of dread and certainty sinking into him. Chilling him to his core. That smooth, dark voice echoes in his ear. Claiming him. Possessing him. Promising him everything he has ever wished for. Lighting his skin on fire.

He doesn't sleep for the rest of the night.

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The fears and doubts that plague that day are the nightmares that plague the night.

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“Hello Neville Longbottom,” Luna greets as she comes over and sits down at the table where he and Harry are working in the library. Harry is at his usual table in the far back where no one bothers him. This far away, they don't have to worry about any soft conversation they might need to have. They are up to their eyes in research and this is only the beginning. Harry is beginning to regret that he said anything. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if this was the only thing they had to work on, but it isn't. All their Professors are burying them in work to get them ready for their OWLs.

But Longbottom is now fully invested and determined to do this. Something seems to have ignited inside of him after their Professors talked to them. Well, good for him. Harry is too busy reading. And regretting his dumb idea for that.

Longbottom blinks up at her. “Hello?” he asks more than says.

Which is generally how most people react when they first meet her. “Longbottom, Luna. Luna, Longbottom,” he says without looking up from his book. “Have a good day?” he asks then.

“Oh yes,” she says happily, “I almost got to see a Four Winged Flipper today. It was most exciting.
Although the Nargles seem particularly feisty this week. I believe something agitated them. Oh, maybe someone accidentally kicked their nest. That always makes them angry.” She nods. “How was your day?”

“Busy,” is all Harry says. That's all he wants to say. The last thing he wants to do is describe every little detail of what went wrong today. There has been... quite a bit of it actually. At this point, all he wants to do is curl up in his bed and sleep forever. How unfortunate that he can't.

Luna just nods at that. “And you?” she asks Longbottom.

“Oh, ah, fine,” he says in surprise. Obviously he wasn't expecting her to talk to him. How foolish. She greeted him first didn't she?

Harry can tell by her tone of voice that she is up to something, he just doesn't know what. He is too tired to figure it out. It is always a riddle with Luna. Usually it doesn't bother him. She has such an interesting way of seeing the world and he likes hearing about. But now, on top of everything else, his head is pounding and he is beyond nauseous. Food is definitely out. He'd likely just sick it up again anyways if he tried.

Which is right when Granger decides to join them. “Oh good, you are already here,” she says as she sits down next to them, “I have been thinking about how to complete everything thoroughly enough. What if we each did some in depth studied for a couple of weeks and then combined the knowledge together. That way we can have a good solid basis before we go on. I could take metamorphmagi and you could take animangi since your godfather is one. And I thought maybe you could write him and get his take on it. That would add such an interesting perspective to it. And I was thinking about contacting a metamorphmagus myself. Apparently there had been one that graduated not too long ago. So, what do you think?”

Harry thinks that his head is going to explode. But he just nods. Fine. Maybe he'll get a couple weeks of peace then before she starts again. Talking with Granger is akin to being hit with an encyclopedia most of the time.

“Great. What are you studying now? Oh, mood altering potions. What are you doing that for, we don't have a potion assignment do we?”

Harry just shakes his head.

“Hello Neville, I didn't see you sitting there. What topic did you pick then? Because I got stuck with Parkinson and she isn't very enthusiastic about much when it comes to classwork. Can you believe it, she wanted to do something on jinxes. Jinxes of all things. How positively first year. And she didn't sound at all enthused when I mentioned the usefulness of charms in unusual ways. It wasn't as if that is even that complicated.” She huffs in annoyance, finally breathing again. “But what are you doing then?”

As Longbottom explains, Harry goes back to reading with any luck she will get her answer and then leave. Not likely though. Granger has never met a learning opportunity that she doesn't like. Not that he's seen anyways. And he's right.

“Oh goodness, that does sound amazingly interesting. Have you thought about-”

“Hermione,” Longbottom interrupts her, “thanks, but if you don't mind, I'd like to do this without any of your help. This is suppose to be our project after all.” He motions to Harry.
She blushes. “Oh, right, sorry about that. You know how it is.”

Longbottom smiles and nods. “I know. And maybe if we need another perspective, we could ask you. But for now, we're good.”

Harry hopes that he is just saying that to appease her. Or that he is just talking for himself. Because Harry sure isn't asking for any of her help. He doesn't think he could take it. His head pounds even more viciously just listening to her now. It seems worse than usual today. Normally he has at least a little more tolerance for her.

“Well I'll leave you to it then. See you at supper,” she says as she leaves.

“Goodbye Hermione,” Longbottom says.

Harry says nothing at all. He grimaces at the thought of food. Yeah, no. No food for him right now. Maybe he can get some tea or something. Severus and Regulus always get picky when he doesn't at least have something at meal time.

“Bookworms and whirl flies,” Luna mutters to herself.

Harry snorts at that. Well that's definitely one way to describe Granger. Rather accurate too, all things considered.

Luna nods. “Whirl flies look harmless, but can be vicious if provoked,” she continues, “It is always best to tread carefully around them.”

Longbottom looks at her oddly. Not a bad odd. Not as if he wants to mock her, but as if he only understands half of what she is saying. Again, it's a normal look people have when dealing with her. Although they don't even get to the half bit. They flat out dismiss her as crazy. Her nickname is Loony Luna for a reason after all.

Harry thinks that they are all fools. Luna has a bit of an infestation of whirl flies herself, even if she doesn't always show it. Vicious she can be.

Supper is about as much fun as Harry suspected it would be. He sits there, reading, and listens as Draco complains about his Transfiguration project. He got stuck with Weasley of all people. He has to wonder if Professor McGonagall doesn't secretly want to eliminate some of her students to make the class size more manageable. Or if perhaps she is secretly a sadist. Either seems likely at this point.

He grimaces as he catches another smell of the chicken and sips some more on his tea. It is helping, some, but not enough. Not enough to battle the noise that echoes off every surface in the Hall. Even if he wasn't so nauseous, he wouldn't be able to eat for the pain the noise is giving him.

“Not feeling well then?” Zabini asks over Draco's complaints.

He instantly stops and stares at Harry instead.

Harry wishes that he would keep on talking. And that Zabini wouldn't. He shakes his head gingerly in answer and has some more tea.

“Shouldn't you go to the Hospital Wing then?” Draco asks, “I could walk you there if you wanted,” he offers, as if he thinks that will help.

But Harry shakes his head once again. Hospital Wing? Why would he go to the Hospital Wing for something so small as this? It's nothing serious and Madam Pomfrey has better things to do then
listen to him whine about a little headache. No one wants to hear the Freak complaining either.

“Or I could,” Zabini offers.

Draco glares.

Harry just rolls his eyes so that both of them can see it. Honestly, both of them are ridiculous. And unnerving. Why take so much interest in him now? What is suppose to be the end game here? He doesn’t know and he hates not knowing. Not knowing always means trouble. It means he doesn’t know the rules. And not knowing the rules means punishment, one way or another.

It’s not as if anything about him has changed. And it can’t be something like Zabini just now noticing him or some such shite. For one thing, that sounds like something out of one of those witch’s romance novels. Or another, there is nothing about him to notice anyways. So this means that this has to be some kind of game. And Harry is always the loser in those.

Nott snorts in disgust. “Shall I tie a bow around him so that the winner may unwrap him?” he draws. Why he has decided that he is going to sit with them after all is a mystery. He still doesn’t interact with the others. Even when he does, he doesn’t seem all there. He is too busy watching everything else with those sharp eyes of his.

Still, Harry is thankful. He can sometimes prove a distraction when the other two get to be too much. And he just answered exactly what Harry was wondering. So they are fighting over him for some reason. Great, just what he needs. As if he doesn't have troubles enough. He goes back to his book.

Draco glares briefly at Nott, but then seems to drop the subject. For now. “And don't even get me started on having to work with Finnigan in DADA. He has an absolute fixation with explosions and fire. Which is all well and good for those of common blood, but not when I am the one about singed.”

This was why Harry was so intent on working with Longbottom. No explosions. No other unfortunate habits. And his cauldron melting is something that can be worked around, he is sure. A small price to pay for a peaceful partner.

Nothing else in his life is after all. Best get it where he can.

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In life there are all kinds of people, big and small. Some are out to help, others are out to harm. Some are just trying to live their own lives. And then there are those that really need a good punch to the face to make them tolerable.

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Harry has fled to the West Tower to study. Unlike the Astronomy Tower, where students always seem to be for one reason or another, the West Tower is all but empty all the time. He is trying to get away from the noise of everything. Lately his headache never seems to be going away. It either ebbs or flows, like the tide, but never fully vanishes. It makes dealing with the others even more trying than usual.

Normally he has a certain kind of resigned patience when dealing with people. He has to, to deal
with it all. As much as he would like to, he can't hide from everything. Unfortunately. But now it seems even worse than before, And it's not as if there is even a real reason for it, like in second or fourth year. They are back to hating him as usual.

Sure, the tension is still there, school wide. It hasn't gone away yet. Maybe less people are being injured, but that is about it. There are still duels to break up in the halls. Still tight knit groups that welcome no outsiders. Still a changing hierarchy. The Professors plan still doesn't seem to be working over much. It doesn't help that with the first Quidditch game of the season coming up – Slytherin vs Gryffindor of course – there is now another reason to fight. Another level of tension to deal with. It is beyond frustrating.

So Harry has fled to get some quiet and get some work done. He desperately needs to. His regular homework alone is enough to drown a person without adding the projects to the list. He and Longbottom are working like mad to get a working theory going. And Granger keeps adding and revising and picking at what she wants done.

Nor does it help that he has to write to Black more than usual for the information she wants. He seems amused by this. And excited. He mentioned that maybe Harry can become an animagus too. Follow in the family footsteps. Both he and James were fifteen when they first transformed after all. Wouldn't that be something. Maybe, if he does than they could play together the next time he sees Harry.

It makes something in the pit of his stomach sink. Even if he wanted to – which he doesn't, not really – he would never have the time. And you have to be really good at Transfiguration as well. Apparently that was James and Black's best subject in school. It isn't Harry's. Harry's best, if you can call it that, is DADA. But that is more for sheer desperation than love of the subject. Potions, surprisingly, is his second best. He has no idea how that happened. He thought he was terrible at it.

He also keeps making jokes about his other project with Longbottom, saying what an overachiever he is being. And what a swot he is turning into. All in good nature of course. He never means any harm, no matter how much he might cause. A lovable idiot, he heard Lupin call him one time. He can fully understand why.

But he adds that Longbottom is a good person.

... A bit weak, or so I've heard, but that doesn't matter. Mother was always on about how Magic is Might and power is all that matters. Seeing as how I make a habit of believing the opposite of everything she did, I don't care about that. His Father was a top Auror in the first War before he and his wife were attacked. Actually Alice, Frank's wife, was your godmother, come to think of it. It is a shame how they ended up. My crazy bitch cousin Bellatrix cursed them into insanity. But they were good people.

You should stick with him. A good solid Gryffindor can only be good for you. Like those Weasley twins of yours. Another good, strong Light family. Plus, with an instinct for pranks, what isn't to like? You did a good job, befriending them. Course, yeah I know, all Slytherins aren't bad. You're in the House right? But a Gryffindor is a rock in the storm when you need one.

Let me know if you need anything else. That Granger you are working with sounds like a real firecracker. Kind of like Lily. Boy did your Mother ever have a temper on her. Came with the red hair I guess. But did she ever whip James into shape once she finally gave him a chance. Romance of the century, that's what it was.

You must have gotten your Potions skill from her because James was sure arse at it. I wasn't much better. She and Remus helped us through so we could become Aurors. Now there is a fun job. Have
you had your career talk yet? Decided on anything? Because if you haven’t, I definitely recommend the Aurors. DADA is your best subject isn’t it? And maybe, if you did, I could pull some strings for you. I might not be one anymore, but I still know people.

Have fun kiddo and work hard. But not too hard. I know the OWLs year can be rough, but don’t let it get you down.

Love,

Padfoot

The letter is a crumpled ball at the bottom of his trunk. He wrote down the information Granger needed and tossed it in there with maybe a bit more force than was necessary. He had been shocked, reading it. That was the first time that Black had ever mentioned his Mother. Not that it lasted for long. Soon it was all about James this and James that again.

Become an Auror? He shudders at the mere thought of it. Being an Auror is a job for the heroes. For the believers and the fighters. Harry isn’t any of those things. He is a survivor. And if a survivor is a kind of fighter, than a different kind. One that fights to live, not to protect others. And one that doesn’t mind being in the limelight sometimes, if not frequently.

Harry isn’t a hero. He never was.

And all that talk about Gryffindor and Slytherin and ‘good, Light families’ just makes his stomach clench. Black might not think he is bad or Dark or anything like that. But he still acts as if Slytherins are the enemy somehow. As if they are destined to be bad.

What would he say if he knew that Harry once had part of Voldemort inside of him? The ultimate evil of their age, inside of his head. Would he still think the same of him then? Or would he then think that he belonged in Slytherin? That he was destined to go Dark, like everyone else in the House supposedly is. It’s not a comforting thought. So he ignores it, just like he ignores everything else Black makes him feel. Or he tries to, in any case.

He sighs and continues on his Charm work. They are,ironically enough, working on elemental charms. More specifically at the moment, fire charms. Finnigan is ecstatic. Everyone else who has to sit by him, not so much. Even Professor Flitwick got slightly singed the other day. Fortunately Harry is on the other side of the room, in the back, so he doesn’t have to deal with it.

He looks over the grounds with a sigh. So much to do and so little time to do it. It’s even harder when he doesn’t have any real desire either. It all seems so pointless. Why should he put all of this effort into studying when he likely doesn’t have a future. It doesn’t help that he isn’t sleeping well lately. It’s getting to be a real problem.

Either he can’t fall asleep, tossing and turning until he gives up or nightmares wake him up and he can’t go back to sleep. So he drags onward, reading and working by wandlight until he can go to the common room to work before breakfast.

He knows that both of these things are the kind of things Severus would want to know about. Would want Harry to come talk to him on. Both the lack of sleep and the lack of motivation. He would likely think they are problems he needs to deal with. He hasn’t been having their biweekly talks because of how busy Harry’s schedule is. How busy both of them are. But he stressed that Harry can still come talk to him if he needs anything.

But there is no need to make a big deal out of this. This is something he has always dealt with on his
own. Just because the nightmares might be a little worse now than usual doesn't mean anything. Doesn't mean he should go running to his Professors like a cry baby. They come and they go. Yes, sometimes they get bad. But eventually they even out again. It is all a matter of waiting them out.

As for the lack of motivation, well. That is something that will only make Severus frustrated with him. Just like he gets frustrated when they talk about his future plans. And he doesn't want that. He... may be considering his options regarding the adoption. He knows he should just choose to have them be his legal guardians and be done with it.

But, for some strange reason, he hasn't. Even though he knows it would be the right thing to do, he hasn't said anything yet. He doesn't want to force himself on them. And eventually they will get tired of him. Won't they?

No, not for some strange reason. Harry knows exactly why. Hope. Hope has gotten under his skin again, lighting something inside it has no business lighting. He is so tired of getting burned by it. But still it seems to keep coming back and back again. It is almost as if he likes the pain. Maybe he is a masochist and just hasn't realized it yet.

That would certainly explain why he thought the DADA project he suggested was acceptable to be spoken out loud. And why he is still dealing with Draco and Zabini the way he is.

They are another reason he has fled to where he has. Neither of them seem to be getting the hint. Harry never talks to them, never answers anything they ask in depth, never seems enthusiastic about it. But still they hound him. He feels like a bone that two dogs want. He is being pulled in two different directions and he doesn't like it.

At least Draco has a bit more courtesy some days. Mostly. When Zabini isn't seemingly egging him on, making him cranky and extra pratty. Then he is better. He knows when to back off and when to change the subject. Again, mostly, but still. It is clear that he is trying. And he is less of a hassle to deal him on his own. But add Zabini to the mix and all of that goes out the window. Add Zabini at all and things get uncomfortable for Harry. He has all of the charm and none of the courtesy that Draco has. It is almost as if this is a game for him.

He doesn't understand. Is he that fun to toy with? Is his pain that entertaining? It must be because he keeps poking at it, every chance he gets. Zabini is a drain of energy that Harry doesn't have right now. Exhausting.

What he desperately wishes for is his music. He had gotten too used to listening to it over the summer that now everything sounds too silent now. He misses the way the words would move through him. The way it made him feel. Maybe not always happy, but alive. Oh so alive. Now, some days, he feels as if he is dead. His body is still moving, but it shouldn't be. It just hasn't gotten the message yet. A dead man walking.

He wonders if there is some way he could have it back. He doubts he could listen to it in the dorms. Or the common room for that matter. And there isn't anywhere else. Maybe Severus and Regulus' room, but he would never dare mention that. That would be far too much. Crossing some unspoken line. They have already gone to enough trouble for him. Are willing to go through more. Best not make himself anymore tiresome than he already is. They will only make them abandon him quicker. No need to push his already bad luck.

He already drove Severus mad with it. He is likely glad to be rid of it now. It definitely would not be a good thing to bring it up again. Freaks aren't supposed to be burdens. Freaks are suppose to earn their keep. He hasn't exactly figured out how to do that for his two Professors. He tries to do what they tell him to, but that is just basic. Surely there has to be more to it than that. But what? Asking
them won't help either. More like the opposite. So he has to figure it out for himself. Too bad he is so bad at it.

With the Dursleys it was easy. Even when they tried to trick him and mess him up, Harry could still figure it out. Follow the orders they meant, not the words they said. Now? Now it is so much harder. They are more difficult to read for one. And for another, it is almost as if they mean what they say – that he doesn't need to repay them. But surely that is wrong.

Everyone wants something after all. Everything has a price. So what is theirs?

“Ah, here is our baby Lord,”

“Hiding safe and sound from the masses.”

Fred and George appear, seemingly out of nowhere and take a seat beside him. George nudges him so that he is using him as a backrest. He circles his arms around Harry's waist, engulfing him. It is still odd that this feels... nice, not confining. Not as if he is trapped. But as if he is being guarded. Which he is. He so clearly is. The twins aren't the most subtle of people when they don't try to be.

Fred takes a look at the essay he is writing. “So this is what our Lordship is doing then. Interesting.”

Harry snorts at that. No. No it really isn't. He flexes his back and tilts his head so it is against George's shoulder. It's odd, how tactile they get with him. They aren't that way with anyone else that he has ever seen.

George moves his hands so that he is massaging Harry's shoulders instead. His touch is just the right amount of gentle, yet firm.

He can't help the slight moan he makes. Merlin does that feel good. He knew he had been tense lately, but he didn't realize how much until it began to be rubbed away. It gets even better when George partially shrugs off his robe and shirt. His hands are rough from the callouses on them. But still they move to help, not to hurt. “So tense my Lord,”

“Is there anything we can do to help?”

Harry snorts. “Do my homework for me?” he jokingly asks.

“We could,” Fred offers, “we already know the answers after all.”

“We could tell you and then you could put it in your own words.”

“Or we could simply write it in general.”

Harry... he isn't sure if they are serious or not. They sound like they are. And they have never taken school all that seriously for them to consider cheating a huge deal. But still, would they really? Why? Isn't this something that goes beyond being a good friend? Or is this being a bad friend instead? He doesn't know. He closes his eyes in exhaustion.

“Sleep,” George murmurs in his ear.

“We'll take care of everything.”

Harry shakes his head in denial, but doesn't reply verbally.

“Sleep,” George repeats, “a quick nap will help.”
“We'll be here the entire time. We won't let anything happen to you.”

“Our word as your faithful minions.”

Harry wants to say something to that. Wants to roll his eyes at their joke. Wants to think about what all of this could mean. But he can't. He is already asleep.

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Oh how thoughtlessly cruel some people can be. How sharp they are in their misunderstanding of you. They mean so well, but cut so deep. But oh, how good other people can be. Always there just when you need them the most.

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When Harry wakes up, it is later than he was expecting. He actually does feel refreshed, which is shocking. What is even more shocking is that he did not have a single nightmare. Not even a hint of one. His headache has faded into the background of his head so that it is almost unnoticeable.

Of course the twins are there, just like they promised. They are still close together, talking quietly. The mutter of their voices washes over him as he slowly comes awake. It is comforting. He turns and they both smile at him.

“Our Lord has awakened!”

“Now we shall feast with him.”

Harry rolls his eyes at the both of them. Then again, they aren't wrong about the feast part. They have obviously called a house elf to bring them some food because there really is quite a bit of it in front of them. More than they are going to be able to eat in one sitting. When he turns, he is embarrassed to see that he has drooled all over George. He can feel his face heat up at that.

“Don't worry about it,”

“We have five other siblings remember?”

“Drool is the least of the things we have had to deal with,”

“Believe us.”

Still Harry ducks his head out of the way. Childish. Is he some kind of baby, to be falling asleep on people like this?

“Eat.”

“You don't want this to go wasted do you?”

“A certain elf was more than happy to help us out,”

“Especially once he knew it was you.”

“The Great Harry Potter Sir himself.”
Oh. Dobby. He can feel himself blush again. Dobby still likes to help him out, even after all these years. Still insists that they are friends. And still insists on calling him that. It is rather embarrassing, but he won't stop.

So he eats. He finds that once he does, he is actually hungry. That is another change for him. Lately food just hasn't been very appealing. Now though, it tastes good. It seems as if he eats more than the last two days put together. Who knows, maybe he did.

They shoo him off once they are all finished and tell him to sleep again. It is only when he gets to his dorm that he realizes that they fulfilled another promise. All of his homework is done.

Always keep someone around you trust, to lean on when you need to. A true friend will carry you when you can't move yourself.

For the first Quidditch game, Harry doesn't go. Instead he is visiting the Thestral herd with Luna. It is more fun than he expected it to be. Certainly more fun than watching the match would have been. As it got closer and closer, it felt like that was all anyone could talk about. And Draco had started looking speculatively at him again. He had enough sense not to say anything, but Harry could tell he was thinking it.

Plus it likely would have turned out that Zabini would have insisted on sitting with him. And talking to him. Maybe even getting too close for comfort. He does that sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. It would have made things even more uncomfortable than they already were. So he solved the problem by not watching at all. Fred and George will tell him all the interesting bits after the game anyways, if he wants.

He is glad he made the decision he did. He had been hesitant about the whole thing at first. Was this really a good idea? It was called the Forbidden Forest for a reason. Who knew what else was all in here besides Luna's Thestrals? He know Centaurs for sure, And other things that can – and will – eat you. But they hadn't run into anything like that.

As it turns out, Thestrals are rather playful creatures, once they are comfortable with you. And that didn't take long. When they first arrived, Cecil had trotted over and greeted Harry like an old friend. Some others had crowded around Luna, clearly use to her. More than that, they clearly adored her. It is pretty sweet to watch actually. She just as clearly adores them back.

So they end up playing with the younger ones while the adults watch one. They guard them from any danger they might encounter. They run and they jump and they laugh. Harry is breathless from laughter. And he can't remember the last time he laughed so much.

A quick glance tells him that once again, Luna is running around shoeless.

"The Nargles took them," she says innocently.

Harry snorts at that. Nargles. Right. The girl just really hates wearing shoes for some reason, Harry suspects. True, they are always missing, but Harry doesn't think the Nargles aren't behind that little problem. Homework? Yes. School books? Sure. Other missing belongings? Definitely. But shoes?
He has his doubts.

Not that she'll ever confirm this of course. But it happens just a little too often for Harry to think otherwise. He wonders how she can stand it, walking on the ground like this. Then again, magic is usually the answer to most things. And he has learned that she is nothing if not creative when she wants to be. But he doesn't dwell on it. It is her choice after all.

They lose themselves in the games they play. It is well past lunch time when they finally leave. Harry is sad to have to and promises to be back. There is something strangely innocent about playing with animals everyone associates with death. Ironic. But something he would definitely like to do again.

To lose himself, if only for a day. That sounds pretty good actually. It's not as if he is worth keeping. Or finding, if he loses himself too much. Depressing maybe, but that's just the way it is.

Some times it is the simple things in life that bring us the most joy.

Harry stares at the stacks of books in front of his and pushes down a sigh of despair. This... this is not what he had in mind when Granger suggested they spend their Saturday doing a little bit of work on their project. Really, he should have known better. This probably is a little bit, for her.

“I found some more books that I thought might be useful for us,” she says cheerfully, “I think this will really help us make a good start on everything.”

A good start? Merlin take him now.

“And if we make enough headway with this today, we should be right on schedule. We're running a little behind as his. God, with everything else we have to do, this is going to take some arranging. I knew this year was going to be busy, but I didn't anticipate these side projects as well. Especially with the OWLs. It's a good thing I started my planner as soon as the year started. Time management is even more important than ever. Oh,” she perks up, “I could make one for you too, if you wanted.”

A planner. She wants to make a planner for him. He shakes his head. He is not giving her that kind of power over him. If she knows when he is free then she'll know right when to pounce on him. He can manage on his own.

“If you're sure then,” She huffs. “But really, this is all so ridiculous. This isn't even taking into the fact that everyone seems to have lost their minds this year. Honestly, it's a disgrace. Did you know I'm suddenly more popular just for being a Muggleborn? And they expect me to be happy about it too! As if it isn't the same thing as looking down on me because of the same reason. Blood purity is so stupid.”

Harry nods, both in agreement with her and to keep her moving.

She almost seems surprised by this. “Oh? I thought all Slytherins agreed with it.”

Now it is Harry that huffs. “Not all Slytherins are evil you know. Just because some of them are right gits and bastards, doesn't mean the entire House is. The way people go on about it, you would think
it is the ultimate sign of the Dark. That we all go bad. Well if you think so, why not just kill us all and be done with it? After all, we're all evil. Surely we deserve it.” And wow, more of that came of then he was expecting. And much more bitterly as well.

Then again, this has been building inside of him for a long time. Ever since he was Sorted, practically. Ever since he was ostracized by the other three Houses for being in the wrong House. For being Slytherin. For clearly being evil when he was suppose to be the hero. Since first year, when they mocked and cursed him. Since second year, when they decided he was the one setting the monster on them. Since third year, when they shunned him. Since fourth year, when they accused him of being something he isn't. Again. And now this year, when he once again doesn't fit into their expectations. Their standards for him.

Granger looks horrified at the thought though. “How can you say that, they're children,” she hisses, “You want to kill a bunch of eleven year olds just for being Sorted in Slytherin?”

“No, but I'm surprised you don't,” he says simply.

“Of course not!” she sounds positively outraged now, “I'm not a murderer. I don't condone that. And I especially don't condone genocide. That is disgusting.” She sneers at him as if she thinks that he is a bug on her shoe. A gooey one that she just stepped on and now there is a mess. “You know, I thought you were one of the better Slytherins, but obviously I was wrong.”

Harry feels tired all of a sudden. As if he just took a big sip of Dreamless Sleep. He doesn't know why he tries anymore. No matter what he does, no matter what he says, it never seems to work out. No one ever understands. No one ever gets it. Hell, he hadn't even been trying this time. His temper had flared and it had come out. Just like with Draco. Only not as extreme thank Merlin. The last thing he wants is for Granger to know anything personal about him.

He has nothing to say after that. What is the point? She'd likely misunderstand anything else he has to say as well. Why waste the time? He has learned at a young age when someone doesn't want to listen to him. When they are determined to punish him, no matter what. Coming to Hogwarts hasn't changed that.

So he keeps his mouth shut and opens the first book he picks up. Best to get this over with then.

Granger doesn't say anything either. She opens her own book and begins to read. Her quill scratches across the parchment as she makes furious notes. Whether that is because she is reading so quickly or because she is so mad at him, he doesn't know.

The silence is heavy and charged between them. As if a single spark will light the fire. Have the whole thing burst into flames. He wonders, will it burn him alive if it does? Or will he be stuck, choking on smoke, feeling the flames consume him, but still live? Fire wouldn't be his preferred way to go, but it is a way.

Harry will give her this though, Granger's determination is as strong as her will to learn. Even as disgusted as she is with him, they still spend the entire day in the library. She leaves to eat lunch. Harry doesn't. The mere thought of food is enough to make him gag. It wouldn't be worth it to try.

Besides when she is gone, he is able to untense his muscles some. He can feel the strain in them already and it hasn't even been half a day yet. It is easier to work without waiting for the next blow it come. It always has been. Not that he isn't use to working under that kind of pressure. He is. But that doesn't mean he likes it.

Part of the problem is how bloody irritated he is with her. She took what he said and twisted it the
completely opposite direction. How did she manage that? If she is supposed to be so smart, how could she not see that he was agreeing with her. That he is just as – if not more so, most definitely more so – frustrated then she is. He was being bloody sarcastic! Doesn't she know sarcasm? Obviously not.

No he doesn't want to kill an entire House. Even if he just might hate them, he doesn't want to kill them. He's not a monster. He's not like that. He's not!

Then again, maybe he is. Maybe she is reacting to something he can't see in himself. He has this terrible power inside of him. He had Voldemort's soul inside of him. He is potentially his soulmate.

Tom Riddle

Draco Malfoy

One is an enemy. One is someone to love him. Only no one loves him. He doubts Voldemort was capable of it. And Draco only seems to like him now because he thinks that he is suppose to. What happens when he gets to know the real Harry? He won't like him then, that's for bloody sure. So he is unlovable, even to his soulmate.

Maybe Granger is right. Maybe he is the monster she thinks he is after all.

When she comes back, she still doesn't say a word to him. She still blatantly ignores him, as if he isn't worth her time. As if he is scum. And isn't he? Isn't he a monster? It sure feels like it some days.

Enough people have tried to tell him that. Just how dense is he, that he is only realizing this now? That it has taken this many years for him to learn.

No. No, that's not quite true. He knew before this. He always knew. And he especially knew after he killed Quirrell. But he had allowed himself to forget. He had let Severus and Regulus help him forget. He had let Luna and the twins make him doubt, if only a little bit. They are the reason this feels as if it is a new revelation. As if it is some kind of surprise when it shouldn't be.

They mean well, he knows. They seem to care about him, for some strange reason. But they are telling him that he is something that he isn't. That he is just a boy. That he deserves good things. That he isn't a failure and a Freak and a monster. That he is just Harry. They mean well, but they are lying to him. Or he has somehow fooled them into seeing something that isn't there.

It shouldn't be possible to fool Severus and Regulus. They are so much smarter and so much more powerful than he is. It shouldn't be possible. But what if it is? What if his terrible power has been clouding their minds all these years. If it crept up on them slowly, if it slowly changed their perception of him, would they have noticed?

And wouldn't that mean it would be even easier to do the same to the twins and Luna? They aren't nearly as powerful. They don't nearly have the same experience to know how to fend him off. If two grown wizards can't, what chance do they have? The idea makes him sick.

It makes sense. It makes so much sense now that he thinks about it. Why else would they take an interest in him? Why else would they waste so much time and resources on him? Why else would Severus want to adopt him? There is no other reason than this. This, this, is the explanation he has been waiting for. The final answer. It is because he is a monster. He is so bad that he doesn't even realize that he is doing it.

His core is acting out, without him even having to think about it. He is corrupting those he spends too much time with. The idea makes him sick. What about his classmates? What about Longbottom?
What is he doing to them?

Slowly he takes a breath to calm himself down. He can't get himself worked up over this. Not here. Not now. Not when he isn't safe. Not in front of Granger. Besides, there must be a way for them to protect themselves. Just look at how she is reacting now. So it must be possible. This must be the way to do it. The way to block his powers off is to block Harry himself off.

All those times when he wondered by everyone was turning on him. When they mocked and cursed and completely rejected him. That wasn't them simply being cruel. That was them protecting themselves from him. From his terrible powers taking over their minds. Influencing them so that they would like him. Befriend him. Hasn't his greatest wish always been to have someone to love him? Just one? Well his power has obviously taken that wish and corrupted it. It is trying to make everyone love him. No wonder they treat him so.

It makes so much sense now. Of course that is the answer. Of course that is the only reason anyone would voluntarily spend time with him. He has corrupted them.

Now all he has to do is stop. Stop spending time with them. Stop talking to them. Stop wanting to be friends with them. If he avoids them long enough then surely their minds will clear. They will see him for what he really is. Then they can happily hate him, just like everyone else.

And maybe this will hurt him, but this is the right thing to do. The only thing to do. And doesn't he deserve this, for controlling them all these years? Doesn't he deserve the pain? It is his terrible powers that did this to them. It was his selfish wish, his damning hope, that made this possible. If only he had learned sooner how unlovable he is. If only he had never let hope in. Then they would be able to live their own lives. They would be free of him.

This is what is best for them. Best for everyone. He shouldn't even be alive. That he is is an act of pure evil. It wasn't his Mother's sacrifice that saved him, like that Headmaster said, it was Voldemort himself. Voldemort's power going into him and keeping him alive. Doesn't that explanation fit better? After all, how could his Mum love him? He had only been a year old then. He never did anything to earn that love. This makes much more sense.

He is evil. He has always been evil. He will likely always be evil. He wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for that. He always knew there was something wrong with him. It is only his own fault that he forgot this. That he let hope in.


Freak.

He needs to let go. He needs to stop himself somehow. And if the only way to do that is by permanently stopping himself, well then. It is what is necessary. For the Greater Good, as the Headmaster would say. It is for the best. No one mourns the wicked after all.

It will take some planning. And the right timing. He can't have anyone interrupting. His power might take a hold of them and make them stop him. He is sure this power wants to keep on living after all. Why else hasn't he done the right thing before now?

But this is not his first option. Not yet. First he needs to somehow break his hold on people. He needs a chance for his powers to fade. Because what if even death doesn't stop it? What if they do mourn him because his control hasn't faded yet. They don't deserve that. They don't deserve to be forced to mourn something that is controlling them like this. They deserve to be free of him first.
If Harry believed in an afterlife, he might be scared of this idea. If he listened to other people's faith, then surely he knows that he is going to hell. That is where all the evil things go. To hell to be tortured and punished for the rest of eternity. And that is the only faith he has ever heard about. His aunt and Uncle attended Church each Sunday, taking Dudley with them. To keep up appearances of course. Not because they really believed. Have to always appear normal after all.

But even so, he did pick up something from them. Heaven or hell. Those are his only two choices. And he certainly isn't anywhere good enough to go to Heaven. Maybe if he had died as a baby, then he would have a chance. But now? Now he has been far too corrupted for that. Hell is the only place for someone like him.

That is, if he believes that it is real. He doesn't, not really. He's never believed in any of it. Not the Devil, not some almighty Creator looking down on them from above. None of it. Maybe he should. Maybe it is real, like the same way magic is real. You only know about it once you are introduced to it. You only find out for sure once you die. Is an afterlife such a hard thing to consider when he lives in a world of magic?

Still, he doesn't. He has no reason to. What good has faith ever done him? Nothing, that's what. It serves no purpose, in his world. Just like he serves no purpose in this one. Only to destroy.

When revelation hit, there is no stopping it. It tears through everything, leaving nothing in its path untouched. Whether it is right or not has no bearing on the matter. What is thought cannot be unthought. It burrows into the mind, making a new home for itself among all the other thoughts and beliefs already there.

Try as he might, Harry can't escape the inevitable – his career conference with Severus. Not that he actually tried to. That would be pure stupidity. For one thing, it would never work, so why even try? For another thing, it would tell Severus that something is wrong. He doesn't want that. He will probably try to tell Harry all the reasons he is wrong, when he only thinks that because he is under Harry's influence.

Should he even call him by his first name now? Wouldn't that strengthen his hold on his Professor? On both of them? The more he wants to hold onto them, the deeper this power of his will sink into them. That will have to be the first step in pulling himself away. In breaking his hold. Distance.

But, still, he has to go so he arrives at Professor Snape's office right on time and knocks.

"Come in Potter," he calls.

Harry does and nods to him as he carefully sits down.

Professor Snape folds his hands and looks at him. "Dare I hope that you have the slightest idea of what you would like to do after you graduate?"

Harry shakes his head. No. For one, he now knows there is no point. For another thing, he still isn't good at anything. He has no talent to harness or develop into something useful.
Professor Snape sighs a long sigh. Resigned, as if he were expecting just this. “I thought as much. So let us start from the beginning. Tell me what you like to do.”

Harry shrugs, staring at the desk instead of his Professor. It is covered with essays, books, quills and ink. All laid out in an orderly fashion. It isn't surprising. He is always neat, in everything he does.

“I require a verbal answer Potter,” Professor Snape says.

“Flying?” Harry suggests. Because he does like it.

“Flying yes, but considering I know that you would not want to turn that into a career, I am afraid you are going to have to list more than that. Now what else?”

“Reading?” Harry tries next. Because it is almost true. It may not be his favorite thing, but he does enjoy it. Sometimes. Other times he needs the knowledge so he can learn the rules. Either way, he does enough of it.

“And is that a question or an answer?” Professor Snape's voice rumbles as he talks. It has always reminded Harry of thunder during a storm. It can be low and continuous. It can be loud and sharp. It can come out of nowhere and scare you. Or, if you are use to it, if you like the sound of it, it can help relax you.

“Both,” he says.

Professor Snape sighs again. “Come now Potter, why is this so hard today? Because it is official? Or is today a bad day for you?”

Practically every day is a bad day for Harry, but he can hardly say that. “I didn't sleep well last night,” he offers because he knows that Professor Snape will accept that. And he's not even lying about it either. His nightmares seem to be running rampant lately.

He hums in thought. “I see. Just last night or have they been a reoccurring problem lately?”

“They haven't gotten any worse then they were over the summer,” he lies, eyes still focused on the desk. This should be enough. Both of them are well aware of how much peace he had in his sleep during the summer. It's not exactly a reassuring statement. But it is enough to not give away that they are even worse now. He is so tired of having Riddle in his head.

“I will be giving you some Dreamless Sleep potion and I expect you to use it.” He looks sternly at Harry.

Even he can tell that without looking at him. He nods in answer.

“Very good then. Now, I will be giving you a stack of pamphlets to look through. I expect you to read them and make notes and questions you have on at least five of them. We will be discussing them in a week. As well, Regulus would like to talk to you. You may join us after supper in our rooms to talk. Yes?”

“Yes Sir,” Harry says.

Professor Snape sighs. “Child, I know life is hard, but even the darkness cannot last forever.”

Harry has nothing to say to that. It sounds like one of those things adults say to make kids feel better about themselves. A waste of words. A lie wrapped in bright colors.
“Now here,” he hands Harry the pamphlets, “You may leave, but remember what I said.”

“Yes Sir,” Harry repeats and talks to the door.

“And Potter,” Professor Snape says, “Professor Graham has let me review your latest write up on your project. It is well reasoned.”

Harry almost starts at that. A compliment? Professor Snape is giving him a compliment? A real one. Those are rarer than a unicorn sighting. It makes something in him glow even as something in him wilts. A compliment. But it can't be real. Not if he is talking to Harry of all people. Still, if there is one thing Professor Snape hates – besides dunderheads – is rudeness. “Thank you Sir,” he says and walks out the door.

He lets his feet wander. Since this was supposed to take much longer, he now has some unexpected free time. He should use it to do some studying. Or work on his Transfiguration project. The sooner he gets that done, the better. Hell, he should even use it to complete the assignment he just received. But he doesn't do any of that. He is far too restless. So he wanders the halls instead, sticking to the more deserted paths.

Some days Hogwarts seems too small to fit all of its students in one place. Sometimes it seems too big. As if it is impossible to fill all of the rooms. His footsteps echo as he walks, completely alone and undisturbed. Good. This is the way it should be. Others shouldn't have to be forced to endure his presence.

Almost without realizing it, he begins to hum Dream On. It seems appropriate here. Right now, it feels as if he is the only person in this castle. On Earth. Totally and completely alone, with not a soul to interact with him. It is an odd head space to have. Especially when he knows it isn't true. Still, nothing really seems real at the moment.

He stares at everything as if it is new. As if he has never seen it before. The walls, the carpet, the portraits. Even his hands, when they catch his attention. Everything is new and yet nothing is real. Definitely odd to be sure. But strangely peaceful as well. Right now, he isn't worried about his school work or his powers or his future. He can simply walk and be.

He doesn't know how long he walks like this. Time loses all of its meaning, along with everything else. It is only when he passes a window and sees how far the sun has sunk does he realize just how much time has passed. It is suppertime now. He makes no move to go to the Great Hall. He isn't hungry. Again. Lately food hasn't sounded good at all.

He is use to going without at the Dursleys, so it is fine. It doesn't bother him much. He knows how long he can go without eating before he gets too weak. Besides, why waste the food on him? He is a Freak. He has terrible powers. He doesn't deserve to eat.

He likely wouldn't be able to keep it down in any case. Aunt Petunia always said he didn't deserve food if he was just going to sick it right back up again. He was already a drain on their resources. Already a burden. They weren't going to waste anything on him if he was going to be ungrateful about it. Dudley deserved it more anyways. He always did.

So going without food isn't a problem. He should probably go to stop people from noticing his absence. Draco will. And Professor Snape and Professor Black will. Maybe Luna and the twins. No one else though. Or if they do, they won't care.

But he can't make his feet move from the window. The mere thought of going to the Great Hall makes him cringe. It sounds bad. It sounds like too much effort. Too much noise and too many
people and too many expectations he has to disappoint. The thought of Draco or Zabini talking to him makes him shudder. Or his Professors and their too watching, too knowing eyes. Too much. It all feels like too much.

So he stays where he is, watching the sunset, until it is time to go to his Professors’ rooms. He makes his way steadily down to the dungeons and waits at the portrait he knows is theirs. As always, the boomslang in it greets Harry. Harry greets him back before it opens.

Professor Black smiles as he walks in. “Harry, come in. You weren’t at meal tonight, did you eat elsewhere?”

Harry nods. Easier to do that then to explain he had been wandering the halls these past hours. He might get worried. And there is no reason to worry about him.

“Good then. Come, sit. Severus is brewing so it's just going to be the two of us tonight.”

Harry curls up in the corner of the couch, trying to make himself as small as possible. Always present the smallest possible target that you can. Don't take up room that other people might need. Don't contaminate things you shouldn't be.

“Severus mentioned that you had a little trouble with your career talk today. And I realized that I completely forgot to mention that you have another option, should you decide to agree to the adoption.”

The adoption. Something twists in Harry's stomach. The adoption is the last thing he should be thinking about right now. He can't accept. He knows he can't accept. He hadn't even known if he was going to before. But now he definitely can't. It's funny, in a grim sort of way, that now that he knows he can't, it hurts. It hurts to know that he can never have it. Before, when it was possible, he was cautious, leery about it. But now that he can't have it, it feels like another strike against him.

“If you agree, you would become my heir. I am Lord Black because Sirius was disinherited when he was sixteen. That meant the title fell to me. I will pass it on to any children I have. And if I don't have children, I will need to pass it on to another family member.”

Lord Black? Harry? What a joke this is. Not that he thinks Professor Black isn't serious. It is just the thought of Harry as a Lord is ridiculous. He can't even imagine. In the first place, he is not cut out to be a Lord. He is so far opposite of anything a Lord should be, he can't even see the other end of the road. In the second place, he can't be Lord Black. That is too much power for him. Too many people who would be exposed to him. This is their government they are talking about. With his powers, he could potentially corrupt the entire thing. Well, more than it already is anyways.

“Now this doesn't mean you have to be in the Wizengamot if you do not want to. You can give someone else the right to use your proxy vote instead. Someone that you can trust to vote in ways you agree with, mind you. It defeats the purpose otherwise.”

Harry nods to show that he understands.

“I was not active in my youth. Certain circumstances prevented me from doing what I wished to do. That meant that I chose a proxy for myself. Now that I no longer have to worry about that, I am slowly picking up more of my duties again.”

Harry knows that he means that now that Voldemort is dead. Before he had to act like a Death Eater. Like he was faithful when really he and Professor Snape were working to kill him. And now that he is gone, Professor Black can do as he likes.
“If you were to become my heir, I would teach you all that you needed to know. When I died then, it would be your choice whether you are active or not. But you would still hold the title and there are still certain responsibilities that you would have, regardless of how active you were in politics.”

Harry nods again, but he can't wrap his mind around it. The entire idea doesn't seem real. It is like he is staring at it from the other side of a stained glass window. He can see it, a bit, but it is distorted from the glass. It is like earlier, when nothing seemed real. This doesn't either. Not really.

“And separate from that, but still important, if you became my heir then you would not have to worry about getting a job if you did not want to. Technically speaking, the Blacks are drowning in money. None of us need to work if we don't wish to. That is the path Sirius is taking. Oh he is gleefully spending the Ministry's money right now, but he can access the Black fortune anytime he wants. I reinstated him into the family,” he adds, to clarify. “As my heir, you would be more than entitled to doing just that. Do I personally recommend it? No because it would drive me mad. But it is an option nonetheless.”

Harry can feel his eyes widen at that. Money. It wouldn't just be a title and power he would get, it would be money as well? Enough that he would never have to work if he didn't want to. Bloody hell. Not that he would ever be able to do it. Professor Black is right on that. He isn't the only one who would be driven mad by that. But the mere thought of that alone. Just how much money they must have...

His parents left him a vault of course. It has been enough to get him through school so far. It will last through graduation as well. If he is really careful, he can stretch it out farther than that. He might need to. Then again, maybe not. But the idea of not having to worry about money, when for the first eleven years he had nothing. And now he has some, but still more than he ever dreamed possible. To add even more to that... Merlin.

“The Blacks are part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight of course. That means we have no muggle blood in the family tree. It also means we're as mad as a bloody hatter, most of us. Even the most sane have some strange ticks that we shouldn't. Others just hide it better than others. Inbreeding.” Professor Black shakes his head, “terrible thing. But at least we aren't deluding the blood with muggles.” He rolls his eyes at that. “Honestly. But in any case, there is no pressure of course, but I wanted to discuss this with you. Do you have any questions?”

Harry shakes his head.

Professor Black frowns at that. “You are having a bad day, aren't you. Normally you're more verbal than this. Well then, as long as you are listening that's fine. I can check in later.”

Harry burrows farther into the couch at the thought. At the negative he is going to have to give. His nails dig into his arms too sharply, coming close to breaking skin. The pinpoints of pain help center him. Remind him where he is now.

“As well, I thought I'd add some more suggestions than what you will see in those pamphlets of yours. One that I know won't be there are options for parselmouths.

Harry can't help but look up at that. What? Options of parselmouths? But how? Everyone is convinced that parseltongue is evil. Just another thing that is wrong with Harry.

“Oh yes,” Professor Black says, “just because the Wizarding UK has turned its back on the skill doesn't mean that it isn't useful. Or that you can't make a comfortable living off of it. It is a rare gift here, so that means that any job that calls for it is in high demand. Doing without generally means complicated spells and more danger. But elsewhere it is more common, you would have a better
chance not just to work, but to learn as well. Nor would you have the stigma you would have here.

“Depending on where you would want to live, you have a wide area open to you. There is the desert area, the Amazons, countries in South America, South Asia is an especially good one. Anywhere there is a large snake population is going to draw more parselmouths. There are even parts of the world where snakes are worshiped. There a parselmouth is practically nobility all on his or her own. Ever respected and you would have a comfortable living there.”

Respected? Worshiped? Harry can't even imagine it. Especially not with the reaction everyone had when it was discovered he could talk to snakes. That was one of his worse years. And Professor Black is here telling him that there is a place where it is the exact opposite? Where he would have respect for being a parselmouth? Insanity.

Professor Black chuckles at the expression that is on Harry's face. He must look as shocked as he feels about the idea. But he can't help it. The idea... well. He ducks his head. It doesn't matter anyways. It's not as if he is going to have a future, is he?

“Just something to think about,” Professor Black says lightly, “but I can see that is enough for today. Off you go, give everything time to sink in. And remember, I will answer any questions you have.”

Harry nods and leaves, thoughts spinning. He lets his feet carry him where they want again. He doesn't want to go back to the common room this early, nor does he want to go to the library. He needs to move. He can't sit still now, not with the way his thoughts are spinning.

He walks and walks and walks until he finds an abandoned classroom to hide in. Dust covers everything he sees as he goes to the front corner and curls up. He can't stop thinking about it – the adoption, parseltongue, his future, his lack of future and skill and everything. Just, everything all at once. It is one thing right after another, with no pause and no break. It is too much. His head is too loud and too much and too dark all at the same time. All of the darkness in him rises up and threatens to swallow him.

Isn't that all what is in him? All the darkness and all the evil. Any good in him has long been choked out. Destroyed. His Aunt and Uncle were the first to see it. No wonder they never loved him. Never wanted him. They saw him for what he was. How bad he was. How bad he was destined to be. Who could love someone like that?


He curls in on himself, wrapping his arms around him. The voices close in on him, all talking at once. All poking and prodding and burning. Bleeding from the inside out as they speak. How much can one person bleed before they run out of blood?

He shivers, chilled to the bone. He almost wishes for someone next to him. Someone to chase this cold away. But no. No, it is better this way. Better that he is alone. He tugs at his hair in a vain attempt to get him mind to silence itself. It doesn't work of course. It is still moving too fast. Everything still feels like too much.

He is drowning in his own head and he doesn't know how to swim.

Hands fly to his hair, burying them in it, tugging and pulling harshly at it. It doesn't help.

He hears a whine and doesn't realize at first that he is the one making it. It barely registers among everything else going through his mind.

He is drowning.
Drowning.

...Drowning.

Just when he thinks he is going to sink to the bottom, never to return, he hears a voice. No. Not a voice. Two voices. Two voices talking to him.

“ It's alright baby Lord.”

“ It's alright little brother.”

“ We won't let anything happen to you.”

“ We won't.”

“ We're here now.”

“ We have you.”

Harry gasps and opens his eyes to see that George and Fred are on either side of him. They are leaning against him, boxing him in. Trapping him. Protecting him. They have their arms slung around him, offering him an anchor to the real world. He grasps it with both hands.

Making a small noise, he turns so that he is completely in one of their arms. Straddling his hips, he buries himself into a strong chest. Sitting like this, he couldn't get any closer if he tried. He doesn't even know which twin it is right now. He doesn't care. All he cares about is that they are real. They are here. They won't let him drown, no matter how much he might deserve it.

He clings as if his very life depends on it. Against his back, he can feel the warm weight of the other twin. A violent chill shakes him and they tighten their hold on him. The voices mock him for this weakness. They jeer as they remind him that, if it were not for him, they would not be here at all. They would be able to live their lives as they wanted. Without him. Without the burden. Without the Freak.

But the voices alone do not have Harry's attention. Fred and George do. And they clearly plan on keeping it. If there is one thing Harry has learned at Hogwarts, it is how obstinately stubborn Gryffindors can be. Especially these two. They begin talking and they don't stop. They talk of classes – apparently NEWTs are just as much fun as the OWLs are, pranks to be had – quite a few of course, stories of their classmates, of their family, of anything they can think of. They switch back and forth, each story more ridiculous than the last.

Soon the voices in his head are drowned out by the voices of the twins. Harry knows that they will be back. But for now, they are gone. For now, they are here instead.

He blushes hotly when he realizes just how he is sitting in Fred's lap. He squirms to get away, but Fred just laughs and tightens his hold briefly. “Hush my Lord, it's fine. Always glad to know I'm your favorite.” He smiles cheekily at Harry.

Behind him, George squawks in disgust. “You? Want makes you think that you are the favorite one? You cheated, sitting on his right side like that.”

“ Because I'm the handsomer one of course.”

“ What mirror have you been looking at? Clearly I am the better looking one.”
“Have you by chance finally gone blind by looking at old Dumbledore's robes?”

“I could ask you the same thing brother dear.”

They bicker like that, Harry in between them, with no care that he is. Or that the position is rather suggestive. They carry on as if they do not have a care in the world. As if everything is right with it.

Harry burrows back into Fred’s side to listen. He can admit it is pretty entertaining when the two of them get like this. He suspects that they play it up, just for him. For anyone really. They seem to have a policy that if anyone thinks they are anything but ridiculous, they are doing something wrong. They aren’t though. Harry has seen how serious, how vicious and how smart they can be. Just because they don't show it, doesn't mean that they aren't. They just prefer to be underestimated instead.

But it always seems different when they are doing it for Harry. As if this is just for him. Just to make him smile. Just to cheer him up. They have no problem putting on a show if there is the slightest chance he might get a laugh out of it.

They are so good to him. It makes something in him scream that they are only doing this because he is making them somehow. That, if not, he would just be another face in the crowd. Another Slytherin to hate and be wary of. That this isn't their choice at all.

For a second, just a moment, he has a moment of doubt. This just feels so real. So... right. Maybe he really is wrong. Maybe he can have this after all.

But no. No it can't be. That is the hope talking. And since when has his hope ever been right? Never, that’s when. His life has been a series of disappointments, one after another, after another, after another. His is not the story of happy endings. Not of heroes and friends and family. He is forever destined to play the villain in his own life.

“So what has our baby Lord been doing on this fine day?” George asks.

Harry shrugs, not really wanting to talk about it, but knowing he should give them something at least. “Career talk.”

“Oh, yes. The fun talk of future,”

“And what you are going to do for the rest of your life.”

“No pressure though,”

“It's only forever. Can you believe that Minnie didn't appear impressed by our plan at all?”

“It was most disheartening, really. I thought she was suppose to lift bright minds up.”

“Not tear them down. It's a fine plan after all.”

“Nothing wrong with running our own joke shop.”

“Although she did admit that it fit us perfectly.”

“Yes, there is that. She looked like she swallowed one too many of Dumbledore's lemon drops,“

“But she did admit it, in the end.”

“So what brilliant advice did you get then?”
“Pamphlets mostly. And some surprising news about how useful parselmouths can be,” Harry says lowly. He doesn't mention the possibility of him becoming the future Lord Black. He never told them about the adoption offer after all. That they were willing to become his legal guardians, yes, but not about the adoption. It had just seemed too big at the time for words. Now he's glad he didn't.

“Well honestly, if you're so worried about it,”

“We can tell you exactly what you can do for your career.”

He blinks at them. “What?” he asks. What can they possibly know that he doesn't?

“Why join us of course.”

“You are more then welcome to become a full partner in our joke shop.”

“You're the reason we are going to be able to open it after all.”

“And with that wickedly smart head of yours,”

“You are sure to be a good addition.”

They nod together, both grinning at him.

But he can't help but frown. There are so many things wrong with that. First of all, “I'm not smart,” he protests.

George snorts. “Of course you are. Or have you already forgotten all of those spells we taught you last year.”

“Spells that were most definitely above your age level. And how well you mastered them?”

“You're smart baby Lord. You just insist on hiding it for some reason.”

“Which is fine if you want to. Merlin knows we do it enough.”

“School has never really been our thing after all,” George nods in agreement, “But never let yourself forget how smart you are.”

Harry goes to protest, but they don't let him.

“No,” Fred says firmly, “you never would have survived this long if you weren't.”

“Book smart isn't everything you know. It's how well you survive.”

“And you, little snake, are the best survivor there is.”

“Never forget that.”

Both of them are serious now, looking at Harry with grave eyes.

Harry nods, because that is the only thing he can do at this point. There is never talking them out of anything once they get serious like this. Obstinate Gryffindors.

They spend the rest of time until curfew talking and then insist on walking him to the common room. As if he is going to get lost. Or something will happen to him along the way. Maybe they just want to see where the entrance is, but he doubts it. He is sure they know. Especially with their copy
of the Marauders Map.

He waves them good night and enters. Clearly it is going to be harder than he thought to avoid them. Gryffindors.

Some times planning on having no future at all is just as exhausting as planning on having one.

But, suddenly, it appeared it wasn't just the twins' Gryffindorness that was a problem. There is Luna, who has taken to joining him and Granger in the library to study. She had come up to their table that first time and smiled brightly at Harry.

"Hello. Do you mind if I join you. I'm hiding from the Snapper Dues," she said, as if she was telling them a secret.

Granger had frowned at being interrupted, but didn't say anything. She never talked anymore unless she had to.

Harry had shrugged. He didn't care. He knew Luna wouldn't bother them. "Snapper Dues?" he had asked.

"Yes," she nods both very seriously and very wisely, "they are related to the Nargles, you know. Nasty things, Snapper Dues."

"I suppose I don't get a name for the Snapper Dues bothering you anymore than the Nargles then, do I?" he raised an eyebrow, something he had definitely picked up from Professor Snape and had not been able to stop since.

Luna had shook her head, giggling slightly. "Don't be silly, I don't name then."

That's what he had thought then. As soon as he knows, he is going to get the twins and they are going to show their... appreciation... for the certain species of wild life living at Hogwarts. It is sure to be most educational.

Granger is frowning at them, but Harry doesn't care. He nods his agreement.

"Oh goody," she said and pulled out her wand. She then proceeded to transfigure the chair he had been sitting in to something like a chair in the common rooms and plopped herself right in his lap. Automatically he moved the book he had been reading and she made herself comfortable. "There," she said in satisfaction, "Much better." She grins at him.

He stares blankly at her. What in the world? Luna has never been especially tactile. Not that he's ever seen anyways. Sure, the twins are with him, but not Luna? So why now? Is it because something happened and she doesn't want to talk about it? Or is Luna just being Luna right now? She did transfigure a comfortable chair though either way. "It looks like the Jackalburs are back inside your head again," she commented lightly.

Harry felt himself blush at that. Damn it, how does she always know? He was well aware, the
thoughts being rather hard to miss, but he didn't want other people knowing. He didn't want them making a big deal about it. It's not important after all. It's just him.

"The what?" Granger finally asks, frowning severely at both of them.

"The Three Eyed Jackalburs," Luna said obviously, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "They are very dangerous you know. Tricky. You have to watch out for them." She nodded seriously.

"And you have to do that from his lap?" she had snapped back irritably.

If she thought Luna was going to take the hint from that, she was sadly mistaken. Luna doesn't do hints. "Oh yes, have to keep a close eye on them. Like I said – they're very tricky. All it takes is an instant and they can have you in their grasp."

Granger seemed to give up after that and went back to her book, muttering irritably to herself.

Harry shrugged and went back to his. Luna entertained herself, never moving the entire time. Somehow it became a habit. She always showed up and she always joined Harry. Not always in his lap, but always touching him in some ways. As if she could hold onto him by just doing this. As if she could save him.

Longbottom took her presence much better. He may not have understood any more, but he accepted it. And Luna seemed to like him much more as well. She talked to him when they took a break and smiled sweetly at him.

That had Harry narrowing his eyes in suspicion. He didn't ask her, because that seemed rude, but he had a suspicion that it had something to do with the name on her covered wrist. That was not her normal smile. It had a different edge to it. One he had never seen before, but can well guess the meaning. He can only hope, that if he is right, that she is careful. He of all people know what trouble those names can bring.

Still, he'll support her in whatever she decides. Just because he doesn't have a soulmate that is capable of loving him doesn't mean that it is all fake. Luna deserves any happiness she can get. Especially after dealing with the Nargles and the Snapper Dues for so long.

And speaking of soulmates, Draco is driving him mad. He has clearly decided that the best way to get to know Harry is to shadow him every chance he gets. Every time he turns around, there he is. Waiting. Still trying, for some reason. Anytime he is not studying or with his friends – or his friends are with him, more like – he is there. It is maddening.

It doesn't help that this development seems to amuse Zabini to no end. His eyes are always laughing at him, even if his mouth isn't. He takes delight in talking to Harry, getting into his space, making Draco glare and growl. It is all a game to him. Harry hates it.

He has taken to hiding in the corner with Nott, just to get some peace from them. Strangely they never go after him when he goes there. He would rather be alone instead, but this is the best he is going to get. And Nott has no real interest in him, so he should be safe.

"Why don't you tell them both to piss off?" he asks one day, when once again he retreats from them.

"Do you really expect them to listen when I say that?" he asks in return, dryly.

"That's when you make them listen to you," he says simply.
Harry looks at him, considering. “Is that why they don't bother you? Because you made them?”

The smile Nott flashes is both brilliant and chilling at the same time. “I simply made it clear when we first arrived that I wanted no part in their power games. When at first they doubted me, I reinforced my words. They understood after that.”

Harry doesn't know whether to be worried or impressed by that. Nott is rather intense without even trying to be. Maybe that was the real reason he was always alone. The bright burning in his eyes scared everyone away. He never seemed to mind Harry joining him though. Likely because Harry was just another shadow in the corner when he did.

And then there are his Professors. Professor Snape is determined to help Harry plan a future he can be happy with – whether he wants to or not. He had flipped through the pamphlets, struggling to think of something to ask about them. Struggling to picture himself doing them. Quite a few of those questions were simply 'why?' He wasn't very impressed by that.

Nor did he seemed terribly impressed when he mentioned that the twins had already offered him a position in their joke shop. At the same time, he almost seemed relieved that he had something to think on. But he did warn “Not to accept their offer because you think you have no other option. Nor because they are your friends. Take a chance to find your own place in the world first. Then see if you still wish to do so.”

But then Harry decided to bring up the question of jobs for parselmouths. Because it is an interesting idea. They talked at length about everything from snake charming to snake breeding to collecting venom and skin for potion ingredients. And that is only the beginning. Apparently there is an entire branch of magic open to those who speak parseltongue – predictably called parselmagic.

It is fascinating and Harry can't help but be interested. He gets caught up in it then, forgetting that he doesn't have a future. Forgetting that he can't have this. But then, maybe that is better. Because now Professor Snape has something to work with. He doesn't have to fret unnecessarily about the Freak.

Still, he doesn't pull back after that. He insists, suddenly, on talking to Harry once a week again. He asks all kinds of questions – about how well he is sleeping, how his stomach feels that he hasn't been eating much or anything heavy, if school is becoming too stressful or not, if he is taking time to relax with his friends. Harry tries to avoid the questions as well as he can. Make everything sound better than it is. He's not sure he does as well as he should.

He also insists that Harry take his nutrient potion and stomach soothers again. He says that will help him. He still needs to gain weight, not lose it. They help, somewhat. Harry is able to handle a little more than toast and tea and potatoes, the bland food he had been sticking too. But they don't help when his headaches hit. Then all he can handle is tea. And he won't complain about those. Professor Snape is already spending enough time making those two potions for him. No need to make a third.

Professor Black is no better. He is always smiling at Harry and asking him how he is doing. When they are alone, he has been pulling him into a side hug briefly before releasing him again. He slings his arm around him, encasing him. Harry can hear his heartbeat from where his head rests against his chest. That is... that is nice. Harry takes the time to memorize the sound so he can remember it when he no longer has this.

None of them will leave him alone. Just when he wants to be alone the most – when he needs to be alone – they all surround him. Someone always seems to be there. How can he break his hold when they are always there?

Maybe that is the problem. His powers have sensed what he wants to do. They are digging in more
to the others as a result. Pulling them more to him when they should be fleeing from him instead. It is the only way he can make sense of it. The only way they are still here. If not, they should have seen him for what he was a long time ago. Seen the monster he has growing inside of him.

Granger can certainly see it. She glares fiercely at him whenever she has to look at him. She is fully professional now, focusing on their work and nothing else. At this point, her goal is to pass this assignment with flying colors. She isn’t about to let a distasteful partner stop her. That’s what she told him. She won’t ruin her academic success because of one boy, no matter how bigoted he may be.

Sometimes he wonders what she actually heard him say that day. If she really thinks that he assumes that she is just as prejudiced as Slytherins and Purebloods as they are about her. If she heard that he is pro murder. If he endorsed mass killings. Either way, it doesn’t matter. She heard and she saw him for what he really is. A monster and a Freak.

One thing she does not seem to be able to ignore is Luna. It is as if her mere presence makes her twitchy. Harry isn’t sure if it is the way she is always touching him or what. It can’t be because she is a distraction. She isn’t. She doesn’t talk. She doesn’t fidget. The most she will do is sometimes hold his book or parchment for him if she is in the way. Other than that, she might as well not even be there.

Granger even took her complaints to Professor McGonagall.

“Potter,” she calls after class, “stay for a moment will you.”

Dread fills him as he waits for everyone to leave. They glance at him as they do, as if they can guess the reason just by looking at him. They can’t. His face is blank as he waits. Soon he is alone, although he can see Granger lingering by the doorway, as if waiting to see what happens. No question about what this is about then.

“Ms Granger has lodged a complaint about you,” she says, “She has told me that you always have one of your friends with you when the two of you are working. I had hoped that I has stressed the importance of this project before, but obviously I need to be more clear for you to understand. Mr Potter, if you do not pass this than you do not pass this class. And loath though I am to do it, this will affect Ms Granger as well. Do you want that?”

Harry shakes his head. He keeps his eyes glued to the floor. He can’t look at his Professor right now. Whether that is because he will scream or he will cry if he does, he doesn’t know. All he knows is that his skin itches, feels too tight around him. Trapping him. He wants to be anywhere but here right at this moment. He wants to scream that it isn’t fair, but when is it ever?

Always his fault. Always to blame. He is the mistake, not other people. All the proof of innocence is up to him to prove. Until then, he is always guilty. Always wrong. It doesn’t matter how much he fights it, he never wins.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Professor McGonagall asks.

Harry looks up at her then. He doesn’t know what makes him ask. It’s not courage and it’s not stupidity. Maybe it’s a combination of the two. Maybe it’s curiosity, pure and simple. Maybe it’s because it doesn’t matter. Nothing does. It never has. “Would you listen, even if I did?” he asks.

She reacts to that, rather unexpectedly. She stares at him, shock clear on her face. “Of course I would Mr Potter,” she sounds highly offended now, “I listen to all of my students who need to talk to me.”

He tilts his head, still staring at her. He feels almost detached as he considers. “Adults always say that
you know. But they never really do, do they? They only hear what they want to hear.”

“Mr Potter,” Professor McGonagall says sternly.

But Harry interrupts her, feeling both bold and uncaring, “Tell me Professor, what do you see the most when you look at me? My dead parents? My slightly insane godfather? Or the color on my tie?” Because he wants to know. Just might need to know. What do people actually see when they look at him? “The failure of a hero? Or a slimy snake?”

“What I see before me is an insolent student. How dare you speak to me like this young man. Just what would your relatives say if they heard you talking like this?”

A spark flares in him and he knows that he shouldn't say whatever it is that is about to come out. He does so anyways. “They'd ask you why you haven't shut me up yet. And then offered suggestions on how to do it. My Uncle prefers a belt, but my Aunt has a pan. Both are especially fond of my cupboard.”

And here is the look of shock again. And anger. But the funny thing is, it doesn't seem to be at him. How odd. “Is that so?” she sounds calm as she speaks, but she isn't. He can tell.

Harry can always tell when an adult is angry at him, whether they are showing it or not. It is pure instinct at this point. “Don't worry Professor, it's less than two months now. Then your Gryffindor will no longer have to put up with the Freak.” He calmly walks out of the room. Neither his Professor nor Granger stop him.

He heads to the library where he is suppose to meet Longbottom. Already he can tell that he is in that particular mood again. It is like when he yelled at Draco. His temper flares and he gets bluntly honest even when he shouldn't. They don't need to know. Most of them wouldn't care in any case. Some might even congratulate them on a job well done. A Freak needs to be kept in line after all.

Still, he doesn't want anything personal about him spread around. Anything that can be used against him is a danger. And what he just said most definitely qualifies as such. He hopes the fall out won't be too bad. Maybe he should hope for none at all, but that is so unlikely that he doesn't even imagine it. He doesn't have that kind of luck.

As he rounds a corner, he about runs into Longbottom. “Oh Harry, er Potter, hi. I was just on my way to the library too,” he says awkwardly, not looking at him.

Harry sighs. Over these last few months he has learned that Longbottom is many things, but subtle is not one of them. “How much did you hear?” he asks. His voice sounds flat, almost dead, to his own ears.

Longbottom, to his credit, blushes, but doesn't deny it. “I only heard the last bit. I didn't mean to. I was coming to meet you because I was going to ask if you wanted to study in the green houses today. I, ah, didn't leave soon enough to hear what I did. Are... are you alright?” he asks hesitantly.

The laugh Harry gives at that is one full of a lifetime of bitterness. “When am I ever Longbottom? If I went crying over every little thing that went wrong, the whole of the country would be flooded.”

Longbottom is silent for a moment as they walk. He is clearly thinking of something, but doesn't quite know how to say it.

Harry lets him be. Without discussing it, they both are headed outside. Getting out of the castle sounds like a good thing right now.
I don't think it's fair – to compare you to your parents,” he finally says.

Harry shrugs. “It happens less now that everyone is aware of what a disappointment I am. The son of the Gryffindor war heroes – a Slytherin.” Another bitter laugh escapes him. Merlin does he need to stop talking. He can't seem to though. It is as if something broke back there and he can't fix it. Not yet. So everything comes rushing out instead.

“ My parents are permanent residents in St Mungo's,” Longbottom starts, “Bellatrix Lestrange cursed them into insanity the same night that Voldemort killed your parents. Their bodies may be alive, but their minds will never recover.”

Harry stays silent, not saying that he already knew this. That Black gave away his secrets for him.

“ My Grandmother raised me. I got... compared to my Dad weekly, if not daily. About how strong he was. About how brave and how powerful he was. How much better at everything he was when he was a kid. My family thought I was a Squib for a long time. My Great-Uncle was determined to scare the magic out of me. One time he pushed me off a pier and I almost drowned. Another time he hung me from a window by my ankle,” he grimaces, “Then he accidentally dropped me. I ended up bouncing so they knew I had magic. They were all ecstatic. Grandmother actually cried when she heard, she was so happy.”

Longbottom sighs. “Sometimes I think that was the last time she was proud of me. I've been pretty much a disappointment ever since. I'm not powerful and I'm not a fighter. I'm a Gryffindor, but I've never been terribly brave. You aren't the only one who doesn't live up to expectations.”

Harry frowns. Why does Longbottom insist on telling him things like this? Giving away his secrets so freely? Doesn't he know how dangerous that is? Or is this because he accidentally heard Harry? A secret for a secret. That would make sense, if he were. However, he isn't sure. Is that really it? Or is this another Gryffindor thing he doesn't understand?

When they enter the green house, it is empty. Longbottom obviously knows what he is doing, absentmindedly checking the plants as they walk by. Once again, it is clear just how much he loves his plants. None are neglected as he moves. Even the smallest one matters to him.

For some strange reason, it makes Harry's throat burn. To see that even the most insignificant are given attention. Obviously there is something more wrong with him then he realized. Crying over plants. Honestly, what a baby. Pathetic.

He offers Harry a warm smile. “Plants don't have any expectations of you. If you care for them properly, then they will grow for you, no matter who you are. I think that's why I loved them so much when I was younger.”

“ You're being rather open today. And with a Slytherin of all people.” Why? Why is he doing this? What can possibly make him think this is a good idea? Is it Harry himself again that is making him spill his secrets?

Longbottom shrugs. “You seem like you need it today. Luna, ah, has been talking to me more lately. Sometimes you come up. Nothing bad,” he hurries on, “just, you know, you're one of her only friends, of course she mentions you. And she might have mentioned you only really talk to strangers when you're upset about something. And that, according to you, basically everyone is a stranger.” He says this nervously, as if he thinks Harry will be angry.

Harry thinks about it. Is he angry? True, this isn't something he ever would have said himself. And it's not something he would especially want known. But this is Luna who said it. Luna, for all she is
mocked, is an excellent judge in character when it comes to everyone who isn't Harry. If she told Longbottom, she must have a reason. Besides, it would likely be best for him to know, since they still have months of the two of them working together. “I'm surprised she said that as clearly as she did.”

Now Longbottom gets a fond smile on his face. “Well, she didn't say it exactly like that. I had to figure it out for myself. It's not so hard, once you know how to listen.”

That is true. It is only so many people don't know how to. Or they don't take the time to learn. And it looks like those feelings might be going both ways. Good. He doesn't say anything about it. He'll let Luna be the one to bring it up. Then he'll remind Longbottom just who her other two friends are. And how protective they can be.

“Besides, sometimes I think we put too much stock into our Houses. I've been told often enough that I should have been a Hufflepuff instead. Slytherin doesn't automatically mean blackmail any more than it does evil.”

That... that is something to hear, right there. It seems as if the Sorting is the only thing the Wizarding World cares about. Nothing else matters except for the House you are in. To hear someone disagree is a rare thing. Harry can't help but see his point though. When has he ever been accepted because of his House? His fellow Housemates don't think he belongs. The other three Houses automatically judge him before they even know his name. As if the colors on his tie is the only thing that matters.

What rubbish.

He nods his agreement.

Longbottom smiles again and then they get to work.

That night Harry gets out his list of assignments to update it. He crosses one off and adds five more. He should review it and choose what to do next. But all he can do is stare at it instead. It is overwhelming. It never seems to shrink, only grow. What is the point of all of it? It is a sisyphean task, so why even bother trying? It is never going to end. No matter how hard he tries, how much he finishes, there is always going to be more.

The longer he stares, the longer it seems to get. It almost seems to take on a laugh of its own. It laughs at him and dares him to try and finish everything. He won't, not ever, but he can try. It will be amusing to watch.

He digs his nails into his thighs to try and snap himself out of it. His list isn't actually laughing at him. It isn't actually alive for it to do so. But it feels like it. And, just for a moment, he swears it actually is. The words rearrange into a face. It's mouth is filled with word sharp teeth as it smirks at him. A dark laugh fills his ears. But then he blinks and it is gone again. It is back to the way it should be.

Harry shakes his head and sighs. It doesn't look any better now than it did five minutes ago. It still looks impossible to do. Still he should. He needs to. But he can't seem to bring himself to lift quill or book. It is as if he is frozen. Glued to the spot. He doesn't have the energy to fight it. To move again. Too much effort.

Everything just feels like too much effort anymore. What is the point of it all?
Good friends are like burs. This stick to you and are impossible to shake off, no matter what you do. No matter what, they will stick by your side. Funny how bad situations can follow the same comparison. You can't get rid of them easily either.

“Hello Harry Potter,” Riddle says.

Harry is back in the Chamber again. All around them water drips, gathering into puddles on the floor. There is a chill to the air. Harry can see his breath when he breathes. Has it always been this cold here? Or is it his mind, making this place more sinister than it is?

Riddle is standing in front of him smiling charmingly. Possessively. “Are you ready Harry?” he asks as he approaches.

“Ready for what?” Harry asks warily.

Riddle stops right in front of him. Slowly he reaches up and caresses his cheek. His skin is warm. Too warm for someone who isn't alive. Does that mean that here, now, he is? That some part of Riddle still lives on? “Why love, haven't you been listening to me? I'm hurt,” he smiles sharply. It looks sharp enough to make Harry bleed.

Harry takes a half step back from him. The hand feels good against his skin. It shouldn't feel good, should it? That in and of itself is enough to make him wary. Nothing good ever stays that way for long. Especially not coming from someone like Riddle. “I'm so sure,” he says dryly.

Riddle gives a pleasant laugh at that, taking another step forward. “Oh Harry. And you claim that we are not suited for each other. We are. I keep telling you that we are. When are you going to listen?”

“About the time you learn the concept of personal boundaries,” Harry snaps, eyes never leaving him.

Riddle's smile widens as he drapes his arms around Harry's shoulders. He leans down to whisper in his ear, “I am your past, your present and your future little one. My soulmate. My Harry Potter. We both know it, no matter how you deny it. And soon everyone else will as well. Are you ready?”

Harry jerks away, but doesn't get far. Can't. He is trapped in Riddle's arms. He shakes his head in denial. No. No it isn't true. No he isn't ready. No to all of this. Just no. Riddle's body radiates heat around him, warming him from the chill in the air.

“Oh Harry, you'll see,” Riddle says gently. Almost lovingly, if it were not for the crazed glint in his eyes, “I will take such good care of you. I care for what is mine. I protect and guard. Once I have you, you will never want for anything again.”

Harry jerks away again, this time managing to escape. “I thought you didn't believe in soulmates. In love,” he said. Because didn't he said that before, didn't he? Or was that Voldemort? Or did he say it at all?

“Love has no true purpose in life, that is true. But haven't I promised you everything you would ever want? You want love, do you not? Just one person to love you? Well little one,” Riddle captures his chin, “I am here for you. I will always be here for you.” Gently he kisses Harry.

His lips are warmer than Harry is expecting softer. This isn't a claiming. This is a gift. Something to
treasure. His first kiss. Part of him can't help but lean into it, while the other part leans away in
disgust. When they part, he is panting hard.

Riddle smiles again, a softer edge to it now. “Soon little one. Soon,” he promises.

Harry jerks awake, chilled to the bone. He touches his lips, to see if he can feel the echo of the kiss
on them. Riddle's words echo in his ear.

Soon everyone will know.

Soon.

He shivers, feeling the forbearing in those words. Soon.

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Sometimes the nightmares that haunt our sleep are able to follow us out into the light of day.

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Everything goes from bad to worse on a Tuesday morning. It comes with the fury of a hundred
wings descending on the Great Hall with the delivery of the mail. At first Harry isn't paying any
attention to it. Today he aches all over, from his head to his toes. No matter how much he stretches, it
still isn't enough. It is as if he has been working non stop for a week at the Dursleys. Nothing helps.

He sips his tea and nibbles on he toast, focusing on nothing at all. All around him he can hear the
other students talking, laughing, reading their mail. He doesn't look up. What is the point? He never
gets any mail. He doesn't even own an owl. Why would he? Who would write him? But slowly he is
aware of eyes on him. They seem to grow with each passing moment. Some glancing at him Some
blatantly staring. But he is the focus of all of them. Without a word Draco hands him this morning's
copy of the Daily Prophet.

The Next Dark Lord Already Among Us?

Harry Potter, our supposed Hero, destined to be the next You-Know-Who?

By Rita Skeeter

A shocking development has just reached the ears of this reporter. One that might have dire
consequences for all of us. As we all know, the reign of You-Know-Who has just ended due to
heroics of the two least expected people possible - Lord Regulus Black and his partner Potion
Master Severus Snape. Both Marked Death Eaters, but both men turned their backs on their former
Master to end the next age of terror before it can begin. It is over. We can all rest easy. But I have
just learned that this may not be so. It is almost too shocking for words.

I have just been told, from a protected source, that our own Boy-Who-Lived might not be the hero
we all thought him to be. Many of you will remember the shock we had five years ago when Potter
was Sorted into Slytherin. We were all worried what this meant for our country and for our beloved
hero. But as time went on, it seemed we had nothing to fear.

That may not be so! My source, who is very confident of their facts, has told me that they know the
names that Potter has written on his wrist – Draco Malfoy and Tom Riddle. This all sounds innocent enough, does it not? But what you may not know is that originally, You-Know-Who's name was Tom Riddle. That's right ladies and gentlemen, Harry Potter bares the name of You-Know-Who on his wrist.

It may not be for innocent reasons either! While we may want to assume that the two are naturally enemies, that may not be the case. Sources report to me that Potter and Malfoy cannot possibly be soulmates. All who attend school with them know that they do not associate. There even seems to be hostilities on Malfoy's end. It is only this year that they have been seen talking together.

What does this mean? We all know that the deceased Malfoy Sr was a follower of You-Know-Who. Is his son now following in his footsteps? Becoming closer to his new Master? Shall we look at the supposed heroes that killed You-Know-Who? Both are reported to be close to Potter. There is even talk of adoption. Getting rid of the competition for their new Lord?

Nor did Potter ever battle You-Know-Who as we all assumed he would. He was not the one to end the War. What does all of this mean? Is Potter You-Know-Who's soulmate, raising up to complete his partners work? Can we really trust this supposed hero? What has he ever done for us?

I have even talked to his relatives, who paint a very different picture from the boy we know. He was raised by his Aunt and Uncle, of his Mother's side. While unusual for a young wizard to be raised by Muggles not his parents, this is exactly what happened. Both told me what a horror he was to raise. That he was always lying and stealing and slacking off. He needed a heavy hand to control him and delighted in disturbing their otherwise peaceful family.

They have confirmed the names, saying they have always known he was bad because of them. And isn't that telling that Muggles, who know nothing of You-Know-Who, are even able to tell this. That they can tell something is wrong just by looking at them. They have expressed their disgust and disappointment in him. About how poorly he turned out, despite their best efforts. Is this who Potter really is when no one is looking? A liar? A thief? Something worse?

Is there another reign of terror on the horizon? Students say that although in previous years, Potter has mostly been a loner, he now has the beginnings of a new group of followers. Others have reported that some even call him 'my Lord', which he answers to. Are we really as safe as we think we are? Or is this just the beginning?

This determined reporter is going to find out. Watch out for more news as I dig to uncover the facts.

Harry refuses to react. He refuses to give them the show they so obviously want. But inside he can feel himself turn to ice at the thought. They know. Riddle in his dreams was right. Now everyone knows. And if he was right about this, what else was he right about? Does this mean that they are soulmates? Does this mean, that somehow, someway, Riddle really is coming for him? The idea makes him sick.

Still, he refuses to show his weakness. He won't. It will only make things worse. Predators only get more vicious once they know they have drawn blood. Once they know that their prey is down and weak. No matter how he wants to, he refuses to run from the room. Flee from all the eyes watching him. Waiting. That will only give them what they want.

Calmly he gives the paper back to Draco with a nod and refocuses on his tea. Food is now a lost cause. He isn't even going to try. It won't end well. Just as nothing ever ends well for him. He feels sick just thinking about it. That they think him capable of becoming the next Dark Lord is enough to make him tremble. Are they right? Have they seen him for what he truly is and are now calling him out on it?
And the twins. Even if they were not mentioned, the twins have now been dragged into this. They have taken their joke seriously. They think they are his followers. That they serve him. He feels disgusting inside. Dirty. As if he is poisoning them by mere association. Isn't he? Their names have been left out for now. That might not be the case next time.

And Draco. The world now knows he has Draco's name on his wrist. Surely he will not want to be around him now. Now that everyone will assume that he is in the next generation of Death Eaters. That he is just like Lord Malfoy Sr. Surely this will put a stop to his insistence that they are soulmates. That he wants to get to know Harry. If he continues, it will ruin any social standing he has left for sure.

And the adoption? How did she find out about the adoption? It was only mentioned to Harry. It wasn't as if they filled out any paperwork or anything. Well, if it wasn't closed to him before, it certainly is now. Not only does he have his terrible power to worry about, their reputation is at stake. Not that either of them seem to care much about it, but still. This is their second chance to live their lives as they want to. Surely they don't need him dragging them down.

This entire thing is a disaster. He wonders how someone found out at all. It isn't as if he has ever told anyone about his names. Not even the twins or Luna. Only Draco. He pointedly doesn't look at him, because that would only add fuel to the fire, but he wonders. Who else would know? It isn't something he ever talked about.

Skeeter said his Aunt and Uncle only confirmed the names, not told her them. So she knew already then. Oh why did she have to find out where he lived? Why did she have to talk to them? Most wizards are content on ignoring Muggles, even if they don't have anything against them personally. So why did she have to be an exception? Now that is another thing everyone knows. His relatives have officially found a way to spread their lies about him even here.

He should have known, that as bad as things seemed, they can always get worse. And that, if they can, they will. They always do. No matter what, it is always the same. He doesn't matter. It is always about the other people around him instead. Always. No one wants a burden. No one wants a Freak. He is destined to be ridiculed and alone for the rest of his life. This is just the latest blow to it all.

Finishing his tea, he holds his head high as he goes to class. Even as he feels everyone staring at him. Even as his skin crawls with all of the attention. He ignores them all, looking straight ahead. He continues to ignore them as he hears the whispers in class. As they speculate in the halls. As everything grows, taking on a life of its own. As they decide that it is true and take matters into their own hands – jeering and cursing him. He pretends they do not exist.

But they do. Oh how they do. Already by the end of that first day he is ready to flee out of his skin. Escape from his own head as it remembers and plays all the taunts and all of the pain back at him. Over and over, on a continuous loop. He can feel the pressure build and build until he thinks he will scream. Until he cries and shakes apart at the seams. He barely resists the urge to claw his way right out of his skin. It won't work. You can't run from your own mind after all.

Once classes are done, he escapes. Out of view from everyone, he runs. Forget not looking like he feels the pressure. Forget never show your weakness. He runs. He goes to the only place he knows is truly safe – Myrtle's loo. He doesn't even care that has work that needs to be done. That he and Granger are suppose to meet up at the library today. She's smart enough to realize why he won't show today.

He doesn't want to know if she agrees or not. Nor if Longbottom does. Or the twins or Luna or, well. If any of those he talks to regularly agrees with Skeeter or not. He hasn't heard them say anything negative, but neither has he heard anything positive either. From those he has seen today so
far. Which is Granger and Longbottom. He can admit that he doesn't want to see Luna or George and Fred. He doesn't think he can bare to see their hate.

It would be only right if they did now. If they hated him because of this. If they didn't want anything to do with him anymore. That is their decision. And it would be the right one to make. But he doesn't think he can bare seeing it right now. Not yet. Give him time, just a little bit of time to try and recover from this. Then he can face them.

Or at least time to be able to pretend that he is recovering from this. There is no going back after this. Not now. No way to unsay what has already been said. The knowledge is out there for the world to know. Of course they are going to use it. Of course it is going to be another strike against him. Another weapon to make him bleed.

“Oh hello,” Myrtle greets, “have you come to share my stall finally?”

Harry shakes his head. “Not yet. You're loo though is still a safe spot to hide.” A part of him is surprised he sounds as calm as he does. Like he isn't about to fall apart right here, right now. He curls up under one of the sinks. He can feel himself begin to tremble. Shivers wreck through his entire body as everything that has happened today sinks in. His teeth chatter and he bites down, hard, to stop the noise. Wrapping his arms around himself as tightly as he can, he lets it all go.

She flies over to him. “Are people bothering you again?”

He snorts through another chill, making him jerk violently. “When aren't they?” Only when they are too busy ignoring him, that's when. Any other time he is fair game. Clenching his eyes shut only makes things worse. He can see them then, their judging and hateful eyes. He opens them again, staring at nothing.

She floats in front of him. “Is this about your bad blood?” she asks, “Because I still say those people deserve it.”

“Tom Riddle killed you, didn't he?” He already knows the answer, but still asks the question out loud anyways. He bites his lip harshly as he waits for her answer. It doesn't help the chattering of his teeth anymore. It might even make it worse. He doesn't stop.

Myrtle nods. “Yes he did. He set the monster on poor little Myrtle. He had such cold eyes, did I tell you that? Beautiful, but you could tell that he was dead inside. So many people loved him. They vowed to follow him anywhere. But they didn't know he had no heart inside his chest. They didn't want to.”

Just as he thought. His nails dig into skin, drawing blood now as he shakes. “I have his name on my wrist.”

“Oh! No wonder you killed his monster then. He is your enemy, isn't he?” She leans forward, eyes bright with interest.

If only it were that simple. If only. Harry shakes his head, looking down at the stone beneath him. The coldness of them seep up into his body. “No. People found out today. They are saying he is my soulmate,” he looks up at her then, “I think they might be right.” This is the first time he has ever said it out loud. It feels both good and terrible to do so.

“People often say stupid things,” Myrtle says, “You can't be Riddle's soulmate.”

“Why not?” Harry frowns at her, even as he dismisses the words. Not to be cruel, but because she doesn't know. She can't. Everyone else believes it. It makes sense. A horrible kind of sense it is true,
but still. What does she know that everyone else doesn't?

“I told you, he was dead inside. You aren't. There's too much sadness and hurt in you for you to be dead.”

“Sometimes I wish I was.” It would be easier that way. Better for everyone. He isn't worth all the trouble to keep him alive and healthy. Not happy. Can he ever remember a time he was happy? Content maybe. Satisfied well enough. But happy? He doesn't think so.

He wouldn't have to deal with this anymore. Not his dangerous power. Not the mocking and the curses. Not the dreams that haunt his night and the nightmares that haunt his day. None of that. Wouldn't it be better for everyone involved? Especially given what they know? Who could want him now? Better to die and save them all the trouble.

“I thought that too when I was alive. Now I wish I could have seen the world. Just a little bit of it,” she sighs. “Still, being a ghost can be interesting. You just have to make sure it is what you want. There are no take backs in death.”

That doesn't sound so bad. The death part, not the ghost part. The whole point of death is to go away to somewhere different. Somewhere the living can't go. Or just go away, period. He can feel the blood run down his limbs from where his nails cut into him. Gone. What a wonderful thing that sounds like. To just go away and never have to return. “Why did you become a ghost?” he asks, “If no one liked you, if you had nothing here, then why?”

Myrtle tilts her head at him. “You know, that is the first time anyone has ever asked me that. No one wants Moaning Myrtle around, even now. They laugh and tease the same as they did then. Nothing changed. Maybe I thought it would. But really, it all happened so quickly, I'm not sure I decided at all.”

“And now you're stuck here?” That... that sounds horrifying to Harry. Maybe if it was just Hogwarts. Maybe if he didn't have to deal with the other students. But still, to be trapped in this hell. Because make no mistake, Hogwarts, as much as Harry might find her beautiful, is another kind of hell to him. Trading one cage for another.

“You make it sound so tragic. I'm sure there is a way to move on if I wanted to, but part of me doesn't. That's why I'm still here.”

Harry's shaking has slowed down now. It still hasn't fully stopped, but it is much better than it was. The itching under his skin isn't threatening to consume him anymore. Is it a bad sign that this conversation helped? That the thought of death helped? Somehow he thinks that it probably is. He doesn't care.

Why would he? He doesn't want to be here anymore.

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No light in your bright eyes. They are dead from the inside out. My, but isn't life dangerous?

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Harry continues to ignore the whispers and the curses. He continues pretending that they do not
exist. That he does not feel them. That they do not touch him. On the outside, it looks as if he is made of stone. He keeps his head down and his thoughts to himself. He doesn't talk, he stops eating in the Great Hall, he avoids people whenever possible.

On the inside, he continues to bleed. He continues to shake. He sinks into himself and hopes that if he goes down far enough, he won't have to come back up again. He will be done with this all. Permanently. If his thighs and arms were visible, the scratches and nail marks where he makes himself bleed would be visible. It's not as if he means to do it. Not really. But it keeps him from screaming. It keeps him contained within himself. He had a similar technique when he was at the Dursleys. But now he is out of practice, so he has to start again. Start new habits. New ways to conform. No one wants to hear the Freak after all. No one cares.

It also helps him focus when he drifts off. It seems to be happening more and more lately. It is hard to concentrate on what is being said in class. What is Professors are trying to teach him. It is as if they are talking through a wall of water. He can hear, but it takes so much effort to understand them.

It doesn't help that his headaches are becoming more frequent now. Nor does it help that his nightmares are even worse than ever now. Riddle haunts his nights, promising to come for him soon. That they were made for each other. Promising to give Harry everything he ever wanted. Touching him gently. Sometimes he swears he can even hear Riddle's voice when he is awake. He'll look around, thinking that he will be right behind him, but no one is there. It is eerie and it wears on his nerves.

Food is all but a loss cause at this point. He continues to take Professor Snape's nutrient potions, but that is about it. He can't handle much else.

But life goes on, no matter what is happening in Harry's life. Work piles up. Granger becomes even more snappish as the term end approaches, worried about her grades. And her projects. And the progress. And their details. And organization. And everything. He really does believe that Luna's whirl flies have taken over her brain by now. She certainly acts like it.

End of the term assignments are introduced and assigned. Reminders of the OWLs happen almost daily. It is always stressed about how their future is riding on these tests and they better pass them if they want one. Harry doesn't think he will ever see the end of his homework list. If he thought it had come alive before, now it is spawning babies. They snarl and laugh at him whenever he looks at it.

It feels as if he is drowning, every time he looks at it. Every time he updates it. Every time he scratches something off. It doesn't matter. It still feels as if it is mocking him along with everything else. What is the point of it all? It's not as if Harry has a future. Why bother?

He thinks that the worst part of this isn't the pain or the whispers or the hate that is being thrown at him. No. The worst part is how he is not allowed to fade away like he wants to. Not become a living ghost, silent and unseen. He is not allowed to disappear. His friends won't let him.

It is true that he is spending quite a bit of time with Myrtle now. But, eventually, the twins always find him. And they always pull him into their current. Harry feels almost helpless as they pull him along, trailing between them like a puppy. Try as he might, he can't escape them. Can't pull away. They won't let him. They are protective and vicious and determined not to let him fade the way they should.

Luna is the one who follows him around, talking about this creature and that creature. About trips her and her Father have taken over her summers. About her classes and her classmates and anything else she wants to. Most of it sounds like nonsense, of course, but there is always a certain reason to it if you listen closely enough. She is at any and all of his studies sessions with Granger and Longbottom
that she can be. He suspects that she would be at more, if she didn't have classes at those times.

She has also dragged him out to see the Thestral herd a few more times. It is never as relaxing and carefree as that first time, but it is still fun. It is almost as if they can sense what Harry is thinking because they stick close to him. They crowd him and rub up against him. The mothers of the herd are especially watchful of him. Luna says it's because he needs some mothering. He blushes at that.

Draco has practically turned into both a mother hen and a dragon. He has taken to huffing over Harry any time he sees him. He always sits next to him in class and raises his chin, as if daring someone to say something. They learn quickly just why they shouldn't. Draco may get a detention, but they get something much worse. He no longer even seems to care about the little game Zabini is playing. He doesn't react the way he should. Instead he watches and waits for a cue if he should intervene or not.

Even Longbottom seems to be protective of him. Slowly but surely it appears as if he is becoming one of their group. Mainly because of Luna of course. She is the one to pull him in and make him smile shyly. But he still smiles at Harry as well. And never treats him differently, no matter what the paper writes about him that day. He is the same as always. Harry thinks that, in a different world, they might have been good friends. As is, he is now one more person he has to worry about influencing. And he has to be. Longbottom even pulled his wand on a fellow Gryffindor one time.

Even when they don't talk about anything, Professor Snape will have him do his homework in their quarters. As if he wants to keep an eye on him. He never offers any help, but he does offer his books as resources. Harry now has a new stack to read for his DADA project. He and Longbottom plan on starting their brewing at the start of next term. They need to finish all the research they can.

Professor Black, on the other hand, takes a different approach to his fussing. He foists tea and biscuits and fruit onto Harry whenever they talk. He tells him stories about the past. Ones that will make him laugh. About the stupid things that happen when he went to Hogwarts. About some of the ridiculous things Black did as a child. Anything to cheer him up. He is the one who brings the gramophone to Hogwarts for him, along with the entire music collection.

"I know Severus can complain about it sometimes, but don't mind him. His taste in music is ridiculous," he says with far too fond a smile for anyone to take him seriously.

Harry is almost tempted to ask just what Professor Snape listens to then, but doesn't dare. And now he has music back in his life again.

It all feels so overwhelming and so pointless all at once. Why bother with him? He isn't worth it. He has never been worth it. He certainly isn't worth it now. Not with all the rumors and all the hate and everything else surrounding him. They should be running from him as fast as they can, not staying. Not purposefully sticking close to him. Sometimes it is almost as if they are flaunting it. As if they want people to know they are with him. Why?

Why can't they just leave him alone? It is inevitable that this is what will happen. One way or another, Harry is destined to end up alone. It doesn't matter what else he does or what they seem to think, this is true. It is one of the universal truths of his life. Something that can not, and will not, change.
He will always be abandoned. He is not worth the effort. He is a burden. He is a monster. He is a Freak.

Those are the things Harry knows will always be the same. Why fight the tide? You never win. It will continue on its way, no matter what you do to stop it.

He desperately wishes that he knew how to control this terrible power of his. Then he could free them. Then they would see him for what he really is. A monster. A Freak. Someone so unlovable that not even his soulmate could want him. Then they could live their lives the way they wanted. Away from him. Free to hate him as they pleased.

Freedom. Isn't it such an odd thing. People long for it their whole lives. Free to do whatever they wish. Free to be how they really are. Free to eat and read and go where you wish, with nothing holding you down. But is anyone ever really free? Aren't there always expectations and limitations and things holding you back? Friends, family, love, fear, lack of resources. Aren't all of those things capable of limiting your freedom?

How can you do what you want, be how you are, if you are too afraid to offend people? If you are weighed down by what they think. If you meet their expectations of you, whether by choice or by force. Doesn't that stop you? As long as you have people in your life that you care for, can you ever really be free?

Harry has never known true freedom in his life. He hasn't even known partial freedom, not really. There is always something holding him back. Something that stops him. Sometimes it is other people. Sometimes it is the voices in his head. He is capable of trapping himself just as well as anyone else. Maybe even better. He is the one who knows what it is like in his head after all.

All this wish for freedom, as if it is the ideal. But is it really? Can Harry ever achieve it? Even death is just another limit, it seems. How can he be free if it doesn't exist, not really? Everything has a price. It is an inescapable fact of life. Everything has a price and everyone wants something. It makes him feel even more hopeless. All he wants to do is sink into himself and never return. To not have to deal with this anymore. To never have been born. Never have existed. That is what he wishes for right now. Wouldn't it be better? It sounds like the ultimate goal. Something perfect and perfectly unachievable. He can't. Not only will people not let him, he already exists. Unless there is some way to time travel back into the past and stop him from being born, from being conceived, than his wish is impossible. He will continue existing here, until one day he does not anymore.

What a daunting thought. When everything is becoming too much. When it all threatens to drown him. When even breathing feels like too much effort sometimes. What a daunting thought to know that he will continuing on existing.

How do other people do it? How do they continue on, day after day as if each step does not drain a little more life out of them? It is impossible to imagine. Maybe it helps that they are normal. They aren't Freaks or monsters. They are just... people. Unlike him.

He just doesn't have the energy for it.

It all comes to a head one day when he wakes from his fitful sleep and can't be arsed to get out of bed. Even the mere thought of it makes him curl further into his blankets. He just. He just can't today. Why today of all days he doesn't know. All he knows is that he is tired and sore and so very drained of all ambition to move.

He should get up. Get dressed. Go to the kitchen to eat with the twins. There are about a hundred
things he has to do today alone and he can't fall behind or he really will drown in all of it. But he can't. So he lays there and listens to the others get ready for class.

"Harry?" Draco asks from the other side of the curtain, "are you ready yet." He can't open them of course. No one but Harry himself can. He's made sure of that.

Harry makes a noise resembling a groan. That is all he feels like making. Even words feel like too much.

"Are you going to get up today? Or are you sick?"

Harry groans again.

"Do you want me to help you to the Hospital Wing?"

He grunts.

Clearly Draco takes that for the negative it is, because he sighs and says, "Fine, but I'll be back to check on you later in case you change your mind. I'll tell the Professors you are sick for you."

He doesn't bother replying to that.

"I hope you feel better soon," Draco says and then walks away.

Harry listens to them fade and then silence. There is no one else in their dorms but him now. He soaks it in. He soaks in the peace, even if it is a false one. It always is. Harry doesn't know what real peace feels like. Does it even exist? Or is another one of those myths people believe in, like freedom?

He feels boneless, but too tense at the same time. As if he can't move a muscle, but he is still waiting for the blow to come. It is an accurate description he thinks. Precise. Isn't that what he is always doing? Not to this extend true. But to some? Yes.

He listens to the silence and cherishes it. But then the voices start creeping in. Whispering poison in his ear. Clouding his vision until all he can see is black. They turn a relatively content moment sour. They whisper and prod and poke until he cannot block them out any longer. Until they are all he can hear. Until they threaten to consume him. Pull him down to their depths were they will keep him forever.

Now the relative safety of his bed doesn't feel safe at all. It feels like a trap. As if the curtains themselves are surrounding him. Blocking his escape. Claustrophobia engulfs all of his other senses until he thinks he will suffocate if he stays here a moment longer.

He rips open the curtains and flees. He doesn't even stop to put on shoes or a cloak. He just goes. Out the dorm, out the common room and into the halls. They are empty right now, everyone in class. But it still isn't enough. He keeps going. Faster and faster until he is sprinting out the doors and into the bright morning air. There is a bite to it, this being late autumn, but he doesn't care. He keeps going.

He doesn't realize where he is headed until he gets there. The Forbidden Forest. Somehow, during those visits with Luna, his brain had labeled this a safe place to be. A happy place. So that is where he goes. Rocks and branches cut his feet, but onward he goes. Only he quickly realizes that he doesn't know where he is going. He entered in such a rush he doesn't know how to find the Thestral herd. He doesn't let that stop him though. He keeps going.

On and on his feet urge him forward. Away from the voices in his head. Away from the things that
would trap him and keep him forever in hell. It is obvious that he is now hopelessly lost. He doesn’t even have his wand with him if something were to go wrong. The best he can hope for is that it will be quick. Seeing as that is what he has always hoped for, that isn't so different from the usual. He pays it no mind.

Eventually he finds a small pond in the middle of a clearing and collapses in front of it. His breath is heavy in his chest, which aches with all the running he has done. His sides heave. His vision blurs. The only thing that is holding him up are his shaky arms. The water looks tempting in front of him. It is clean looking, so he takes a chance. It is cool and pure on his tongue. He drinks with his hands, going slowly. He knows better than to gulp too much water too quickly.

It is as he is bending down to take another handful that he sees it. The reflection of a unicorn. Quickly he looks up and sees that there is an actual unicorn, not a meter from him. Harry stops breathing practically. It is magnificent. The most beautiful thing that he has ever seen in his life. Pure. Untainted and untouched by the evils of this world. And it is staring right at him.

Quickly he lowers his gaze. Unicorns are not known to be violent, but it is better to be safe in his case. He is the opposite of pure, isn't he? He has had the definition of evil living in his head for years. He gained its terrible power. He's killed people, no matter how much he didn't want to. He carries Riddle's name on his wrist. He is a monster and a Freak. The unicorn should be fleeing at the very sight of him.

Instead he watches from the water as it walks closer to him. A soft nose nudges at his face, startling him. He looks up to see the unicorn continue nudging his face affectionately it seems like. But what would it be doing that? He knows that unicorns are suppose to be sensitive to nature and the people they associate with. Why would it be doing this to him?

A closer look tells him that it is a female. Younger – not a baby, but not old enough to have foals of her own yet. Is it because she doesn't know better than? But babies can be even more sensitive than adults to this sort of thing. It makes no sense.

At her urging, he stands up. He has to hold onto her so that his feet do not fold underneath him again. He is unsteady, as if he is the one who doesn't know how to walk here. His muscles feel like water, unable to support himself. Only the unicorn keeps him up.

Slowly she leads him deeper into the forest. He doesn't know where they are going until she leads him straight to her herd. His breath catches again. If he thought that she was magnificent by herself, then it is nothing compared to a herd of them. So much brilliant beauty and purity all in one place.

Uneasy, he follows her to the middle of the herd. What now? What is going to happen to him? Is this... is this it? Unicorns are not violent, but can he be the exception to the rule?

But all the others do is nudge at him as he passes. As if this is their version of a hug. His unicorn lays down and Harry follows in surprise. Tentatively he gets up, but that is not an option, obviously. That is clear when his path is blocked. So even more tentatively he lays down, using her as a pillow. All around him the other unicorns join him. They all, well snuggle is the only word that describes it, up against him. A unicorn version of a puppy pile.

It is incredibly relaxing and incredibly comfortable. Here, here, is what true peace feels like. As it turns out, it is a real thing. You just might have to go to great lengths to find it. Like in the middle of a unicorn pile. He yawns, shocked. Now that his head is quiet, tiredness is rushing back at him. But he isn't worried this time. Not here. Not now.

Closing his eyes, feeling the first true peace he has ever felt, he sleeps.
They say that the brightest light casts the darkest shadow. Well, going by that, it also means that the opposite is true. The darkest of shadows are made by the brightest of lights. You just have to look for them.

It is Hagrid that finds him.

Harry wakes slowly for once, feeling well rested. He can't remember the last time he felt like that. Has he ever? As he focuses, he hears a voice talking.

“It's alright now, I don't want to hurt em. He's just a foal too ye know and his, er, parents want em back safe ye see.”

Harry blinks awake and stares at the sight in front of him. Half the herd is still laying down, surrounding him. The other half are guarding him. Above their heads he can see Hagrid trying to reason with them. It doesn't look as if it is going very well on his part.

“'Arry,” Hagrid greets happily once he sees that he is awake, “good to see ye safe and sound. We've been looking for ye all day now. Had us worried, ye did.”

Harry looks down. Worried? Part of him feels bad because he didn't mean to cause any trouble. The other part is disbelieving that anyone could be worried about him. They were likely glad to get rid of him instead. They are probably only looking because they have to.

A snort and a threatening huff brings his attention back to the herd. Obviously they didn't like something about this because they are staring at Hagrid threateningly.

He holds up his hands. “I didn't mean anything by it,” he promises, “Just tellin the lad how happy I am to see he is safe, is all. No need to get all defensive at me.”

Harry watches in wonder as none of the unicorns back down. Is this... is this all for him? Are they really protecting him? Why?

Hagrid looks at him and smiles. “Looks like ye been adopted. No greater honor than being adopted by a unicorn, specially an entire herd like this. Excellent judge of character ye know. Says much that they are protecting ye like this.”

Harry feels as if he has just entered an alternate universe. One where nothing makes sense. Adoption? Good judgment? Him? That doesn't make any sense in the slightest. At all. Or maybe it is one where the language is different. Logically, the words make sense. They are pronounce correctly and are said in the right order. But there is still something wrong with them. They can't mean what Harry thinks they mean. That is... impossible. Right?

“Would ye mind coming to me then, seeing as how that is the only way to get through? These fellows ain't letting you go any other way.” He smiles at him.

Harry looks at him warily. Leave? He knows he has to. That he can't stay here forever, but a part of him wants to. A part of him never wants to leave. When is he ever going to feel like this again?
he has to – because when does he ever get what he wants? – so he nods and stands.

The unicorn he had been leaning on, the one that led him here, stands with him. As he walks through the crowd, she stays by his side. It is abundantly clear that she is not going to leave him. Two others – males – join her. It is almost an honor guard, walking beside him as he leaves. As he goes, he cannot help a lingering glance back at them. He wants to remember this forever.

Harry accidentally trips over a rock and hisses. His feet, now that he has noticed, are a mass of cuts and bruises. This is going to make walking back fun. He grits his teeth and goes on. But he is stopped by his guard.

“ What?” he asks them?

One of the males kneels down in front of him.

“ Oh no, I couldn't,” he protests. That would be too much. This is already too much as is. He can't expect more.

But obviously you can't argue with unicorns. With their noses they guide him onto the thirds back. He stands up gracefully and begins to walk again.

Harry holds onto his mane gently, but finds he doesn't really need to. It is a much smoother ride then he had been expecting. More comfortable as well.

Hagrid doesn't say anything, although he does glance at Harry from time to time. There is a particular look in his eyes that Harry can't quite figure out. Part wonder, part worry and part... something else. He doesn't know.

When they exit the forest, he can already see a number of the Professors are waiting for them. Professor McGonagall looks stern as always, but there is a spark of – relief? – when she sees him. Professor Flitwick looks positively intrigued by this odd sight. The Headmaster is smiling, eyes twinkling like mad. He is clearly enjoying this.

And then there are Professor Snape and Professor Black. Oh boy. Professor Black looks torn between awe, exasperation and anger. Professor Snape just looks pissed. More so than usual.

He hangs his head. So, they were one of the ones looking for him. As always. Always trouble. Always a burden. How could they ever want him? How could anyone?

Looking at them, he flinches at their expression. Yes, this is bad. He wonders just how badly they are going to punish him for this. He has been such a burden after all. A nuisance and a bother. Everything his relatives had taught him not to be. Is this finally going to be when they see that he is too much trouble after all? He swallows nervously.

Which is exactly when everything catches up with him and the darkness comes rushing in on him. He faints.

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What wonders this world can bring. There has to be, to balance all the bad in it.
Harry wakes up feeling disgusting. His head aches – his whole body actually, he can't breathe through his nose, and he feels both too hot and too cold all at once. It doesn't take much to figure out that he is sick. Great. Just what he needs on top of everything else. As if classes weren't hard enough.

And then his memory kicks in and he remembers both how much shite he is likely in and how school work is the least of his troubles right now. He warily opens an eye, but he doesn't immediately know where he is. Not the dorm. And not the Hospital Wing. So where did they take him? What is going to happen to him next?

He has enough self awareness to feel vaguely embarrassed about passing out like that, but only a little. Enough to know that it was pathetic. Disgusting, really. But not nearly enough to be able to do anything about it. Not with the way he feels like hell right now. Blinking, he tries to place the room he is in, but he can't see it very well without his glasses.

Before he can decide what to do, the door opens and Professor Snape walks in. Harry doesn't need his glasses to recognize him. Nor does he need them to know that he is scowling darkly. He looks to be in a foul mood. Swallowing nervously, he looks down at the bed. He has to blink back tears as his eyes water. He can add throat to the things that ache. Better to make a list of things that don't at this point. It would be easier. And shorter.

"Potter, glad to see you are back among the living," Professor Snape drawls, "You have been mostly unconscious for three days now. But that is what happens when one spends the day outside in autumn without proper clothing, is it not? Especially when one has been feeling poorly before this."

Harry wrings the covet in his hands, not looking up. Not needing to look up to know what expression his Professor is wearing. His voice says it all. A vial is thrust into his line of vision.

"Time for your potions Potter," Professor Snape says.

Harry knows better to complain, especially now. He takes the potion, holding back a grimace at the taste. The empty vial is plucked out of his hands and another replaces it.

"Now this one next."

All told, Harry takes five potions. He recognizes them all– his nutrient potion, fever reducer, pain reliever, muscle relaxant and a milder sleeping potion then Dreamless Sleep. He takes them all without a word. Part of him is shocked that he is being offered anything at all. Not only has he been a terrible nuisance and a burden besides, this isn't something he is use to. His Aunt certainly never cared for him when he was sick. He worked through it. Or, if it got too bad and he might be contagious, he was locked in his cupboard until he was better. Maybe he would get half a pill, if she was feeling generous and some crust and water. Other than that, he is use to being left on his own.

Not that he thinks his Professor would be particularly cruel about this. But he is obviously taking up
his time and energy. Time and energy he could be using on something more useful than him. Why he didn't get dumped in the Hospital Wing, he doesn't know. Unless Madam Pomfrey doesn't want to bother with him either.

“Sleep Potter,” Professor Snape says, “We will talk when you are feeling better.”

That sounds ominous. But Harry can't worry about it for too long before he is asleep again.

The best care can come from the least expected places, sometimes. Never judge a book by its cover, as the saying goes.

He is in and out of sleep for the next, well, Harry doesn't know how long exactly. Most of the time it never really feels as if he is awake at all. Sometimes he remembers drinking his potions. Sometimes he remembers Riddle sitting on the bed next to him, stroking his hair with a possessive smile. Sometimes he is back in his cupboard at the Dursleys. Sometimes he doesn't know where he is, all he knows is that he has to get away. Get out. He isn't safe here. Isn't welcome. He tries to get away, but he can't. Something always stops him.

Most of the time his sleep isn't very restful until suddenly it is. Or it has to be because he doesn't remember anything else until he wakes up feeling much better than before. Sure, his muscles still vaguely ache. And he feels tender all over. And his chest sort of rattles when he breathes. But he is clear headed now, not trapped inside his nightmares, which is a blessing right there. He is feeling better now. Well enough that he should prepare himself to be kicked out now.

Kicked out and told off. He has a hazy memory of Professor Snape telling him they will talk when he is better. Well, he is better now. Time to face the consequences. He braces himself and gets out of bed. Briefly he has to hold on to steady himself. His legs are a bit shaky. But then he lets go and exits the room.

Both Professor Black and Professor Snape look up as he does. Oh. He must be in their quarters. Oh. Then he has been an even bigger burden than he thought he was, invading their space like this.

“What in the blue blazes are you doing out of bed Potter?” Professor Snape asks, “Trying to get sick again?”

“Ah Harry, glad to see you are finally awake. Again,” Professor Black says, “What I believe Severus is trying to ask is why you have left your bed so soon after being so sick?” There is a teasing smile on his face, but it doesn't quite mask the worry in his eyes.

Professor Snape scowls. “I mean exactly what I said,” he grumbles.

Harry blinks at them. “I'm fine now Sirs,” he says and then begins to cough. Try as he might to stop, he can't. It is as if there is a kilo of gravel in his throat.

“So I can see,” Professor Snape says bitingly.

“How about a good soak in the bath,” Professor Black says, “that should help your chest. And I bet
you would like to be clean after almost two weeks without. Cleaning charms only go so far I know.” He stands and herds Harry into the loo before he can protest.

Two weeks? He has been asleep almost two weeks? How? He knew he was sick, but surely he couldn't have been that bad. Carefully he watches as Professor Black prepares the bath himself. He fills the tub with water, adjusting it so that it is the right temperature, and then adds something to it. The room begins to fill with the sweet scent of lavender.

“There you are,” he says, “take your time. No need to rush right now. And call if you need anything.” He briefly squeezes Harry on the shoulder and leaves.

Harry stands there blinking in shock for a moment before obeying. A sigh of pure pleasure escapes as he slips into the water. While he never would have said anything himself, Professor Black was right. Harry did feel more than a bit grimy after waking up. Dried sweat and the feeling of not being able to shower often enough. He hates that feeling. Cleaning charms really do only go so far.

He sinks into the water, letting himself just enjoy it for a few moments before he begins to clean. No matter what Professor Black said, Harry shouldn't linger for too long. He has already wasted enough of their time as is. He is sure they want him gone and out of the way soon. More than soon. So he scrubs himself once and then does it again. He does his hair three times, making sure it no longer feels itchy and gross under his fingers.

Leaning back he gives himself a few more moments to enjoy this. When will he ever get something like this again? Likely never, that's when. So he gives himself just a few more moments, no matter how much he doesn't deserve this.

But then he must have drifted off again because he starts when he hears a knocking on the door. “Harry, are you fine in there?” Professor Black asks.

“Ye -yes,” he says, having to clear his throat to get the word out.

“Alright, we just wanted to make sure. There are clean pajamas for you to dress in. When you are done, come out to the living room. You can have your next set of potions there and some tea and toast, if your stomach can handle it.”

Harry nods and then remembers he can't see the gesture. “Yes Sir,” he says.

“Good. I'll leave you to it then.” Footsteps walk away.

Harry carefully gets out and dresses in the clean pajamas. He can admit that he feels even better now from when he woke up. Grimacing at the water, he drains the tub and puts his towel in the hamper for the laundry before exiting. Cautiously he enters the living room where he is promptly directed to the couch and given his potions. The only difference is that he now has a stomach soother instead of a sleeping draft.

“Now Potter,” Professor Snape says after he is finished, “would you like to explain your logic behind your escape? Because I find myself curious about how my Slytherin could have acted such like a Gryffindor. Or do I have the ginger menaces to blame for that?” He raises an eyebrow in demand for an answer.

“No Sir,” he says, focusing on his knees instead. He had wedged himself into the corner of the couch, so not to take up any more room than he needs to.

Professor Black hands him a large mug of tea. Instead of drinking right away, he holds it to his chest, feeling the warmth of it sink in from the outside. It also gives him something else to focus on, which
he is grateful for. Carefully he takes a sip of it and now the warmth spreads through him on the inside as well. It helps, some.

Professor Black then sets a plate of toast on the small table in front of him. “Eat when you feel like you can,” he says then takes a seat in the chair beside Professor Snape.

“Would that be a no against the ginger menaces or to explaining yourself?” Professor Snape asks, “Because I would hope that it would be the former of the two.”

Harry nods and then shrugs and then tugs his hair in frustration. He knows he needs to explain. There is no getting out of it. Why are words so hard though? It's not even his reluctance to have this conversation, although it is there. It's just the words are like weights in his throat. They are too heavy to get out.

“Let's start with the basics then shall we?” Professor Snape continues, “We have heard from Draco that you had been unwell that day. You would not get out of bed and sounded particularly wretched, according to his words, when he talked to you. He told the Professors as promised. Then, when he went back to check on you, you were gone. A quick check of the Hospital Wing confirmed that you hadn't gone there and the search commenced.

“The other Professors, those who were free, searched the school. Several portraits had seen you running away, but did not know where to. It was only when the Headmaster remembered that blasted map that we finally knew you were in the Forbidden Forest of all places. Hagrid went to retrieve you and came back with a parade of unicorns of all things. They are still being sighted, in case you are wondering. Hagrid appears to be right – they have adopted you. Now, shall we hear your side of the story Mr Potter? Now.”

Harry takes another sip of tea, more to brace himself than anything. “I... I couldn't get out of bed that day. I just couldn't. Everything was just,” he shakes his head in frustration, “But then I had to get out. I had to. I had to get away. I just,” he shrugs, “and the Forbidden Forest was just,” he shrugs again, not knowing how to explain it so they will understand. It seems so impossible. “Then I got lost. A bit. That's when the unicorn, she found me. And at first I thought,” he clutches his mug, “but she brought me back to her herd instead. And they guarded me while I slept.” He gives a final shrug and doesn't look up. He doesn't want to see the expression on either of his Professors faces.

“That would be both the depression and the fatigue taking effect then,” Professor Black says.

That is enough to get Harry to look up. “Sir?” he asks.

“Ah yes, you have officially been diagnosed with fatigue. The depression is our own, which you already knew of in any case, so it is not on any records that anyone can get ahold of. Unlike your names,” he adds darkly, more to himself than to Harry, “But fatigue, most likely brought on by a combination of stress and nightmares, would explain much of what you have been feeling this past term.”

Harry doesn't know where to start with that. Several questions pop into his mind, but he stays silent. He isn't sure if he is allowed to ask them. If he is allowed to talk anymore now that he has – sort of – told his side of things.

But the questions must be obvious on his face because Professor Black answers him, “Fatigue can cause tiredness, headaches, muscle strain, moodiness, a lack of motivation, loss of appetite and a number of other things. Given that some of these symptoms overlap with your depression as well, which would have likely only made it worse.
As for your medical records, every student at Hogwarts have them. And, rather unfortunately in this case, they also contain a record of any name on your wrist. That is how Skeeter found out. Someone broke into your record and then told her.” He scowls darkly, “We do not know who yet, but once we do, they are going to regret the decision for quite some time to come.”

Shivering, Harry is reminded that Professor Snape isn't the only scary one in their relationship. Just because Professor Black doesn't show it all the time, doesn't mean he can't be. He remembers him in the graveyard. He can be just as scary and just as lethal as Professor Snape ever is.

He nods in thanks and takes the last drink of tea. Now what? What are they going to do to him now?

“The next question Potter, is what triggered this latest episode, if anything,” Professor Snape says then, “Dare I assume it is that charming article that has been circling around like a demented chicken?”

Harry grimaces at that. It wouldn't be an inaccurate statement, no. Although that is not where his trouble started. The social upheaval did that. Then again, if one were being completely accurate, the start of it all would have been when he killed Voldemort as a baby. Or maybe when he had been born. He doubts that that is an answer he would want however.

“I see. Dare I next assume that you have been having thoughts about this? That you assume that she is right?”

Harry nods, feeling ashamed for some reason.

“I see. Would you care to explain why that is?”

“Because it's true!” Harry blurts out, “I've known it was true for years now. How else can I have this terrible power inside me?”

“Explain,” is all Professor Snape says, but that's all he needs to say.

It is as if a flood gate has been opened and everything comes spilling out. While earlier the words were too heavy for Harry, now they are as light as a feather. No. Lighter than a feather. Because feathers float. These words pour out of him instead. He trips over the words, trying to get them out quick enough. He talks about his magic and what he figured out about it. He tells them about his conversation with Granger and how she helped him realize it all. He explains this terrible power and what he thought it was doing to other people. He talks about Draco and his nightmares and Black and never being good enough and a Freak and how, for him, soulmates aren't real and, well, everything. Everything.

He is panting slightly when he is done, as if he has just run a long race. As if he has been running for years instead of talking. He is oddly lighter as well. As if it really is possible, right here and now for him to float away. How strange.

Professor Snape looks thunderous. “I am going to kill him,” he says calmly. Much too calmly, perhaps, for a man contemplating murder.

Professor Black doesn't look too upset about that, although he does add, “I believe that death would be too good for him at this moment.”

“ I never said that I was going to be quick about it,” he snaps, “Potter.”

Harry can't help but flinch at the tone.
Professor Snape sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, “Harry,” he begins again, “while there are numerous flaws in your train of thought, there are two that we are going to correct right now before you go back to bed to rest. Tell me, have you ever heard of occlumency?”

Harry shakes his head, watching him carefully.

“It is a means to guard your mind from mental attacks. It’s counter – legilimency – allows you to read a person’s mind. The more skilled you are, the less effort and concentration you need to breach their mind. Once in, the legilimen can read thoughts, memories and shape those thoughts as they will, if they are strong enough. The two greatest legilimens of our age Voldemort and Dumbledore. And do you know what?” He leans forward, a proud smirk lighting his face.

“No Sir,” Harry says, feeling as if this is a question he should answer.

“Neither of them have ever been able to break through my shields. Yes, my legilimency is excellent, but my occlumency is second to none. Do you know what this means?”

“You made a good spy?” Harry asks tentatively. Partly because he thinks that it is true and partly to change the subject. He has an idea of where this is going and he’s not sure how he feels about it. If he can believe it.

Professor Snape snorts at that. “Brat,” he says, in that slightly fonder tone that always lets Harry know that he is secretly amused by his sass, even if he will never admit to it. “It means that no matter how powerful your brain has convinced yourself this so called power is, I am better. I have to be, yes, to have survived this long. It made me a very good spy.” He smiles sharply at this, all teeth and sharp edges.

Something about that look makes Harry relax. It isn't because it is soothing, but because it is the exact opposite. He knows Professor Snape is a fighter, a survivor. He knows just how vicious he is. He isn't one to take things lying down. If there is something wrong, now that he knows, he can trust Professor Snape to fight it. He may not be able to trust much else, but he knows he can trust that. Still, “But-” he starts softly.

“No Harry, this is not something you can debate,” Professor Snape says firmly, “I know my shields and I know my mind. Whatever power your mind has convinced you that you possess, you are still only fifteen years old. Add to that that this is not the way Horcruxes work and you are not getting past my shields. And in any case, I have never felt so much of a hint of attack from you. If it hasn't happened to me, then it hasn't happened to anyone of the people you spend time with. Understand?”

Part of Harry wants to argue more. Wants to try to convince him. Wants to accuse Professor Snape of not listening to him. Only he can't because Harry knows that he is. Professor Snape has never been one to dismiss him, especially not when he has worries such as this. He is trying to help solve his problems, not add to them. Harry may not know why he bothers, but he does know that.

“As to this 'terrible power' as you call it, Potter,” he sighs, “haven't you ever heard of wandless magic you ridiculous child?”

Something in Harry freezes at that. Wandless magic? What is he talking about? Of course he has heard of it. Even if he hadn't, the name explains itself well enough. Magic without a wand. He knows that you begin to learn it your sixth year. Fred and George have talked about it often enough. But this can't be it because it isn't like that. Wandless magic doesn't work that way. Does it?

“In lieu of a wand, the hands are the conductor of your magic. You said your hands tingled when the rock wall exploded down in the Chamber? That was exactly what you were feeling. Not
everyone is able to, which is why not everyone can perform wandless magic easily. Some may never be able to. It would appear that if cultivated correctly, it may come naturally to you.”

Harry stares at Professor Snape in shock. What? Natural at wandless magic, him? How... how can that be possible when he isn't good at anything?

“Do you remember when you first met Sirius in your third year?” Professor Black asks then, “The shields that you formed around us? That is another example of what Severus is talking about. It is true that this isn't the usual way wandless magic manifests, but we both suspect that your magic will always be slightly different from everyone else’s.”

That makes Harry hunch in on himself. Different. Great, just what he wants to hear. He knows what different really means – Freak. It always means Freak when it comes to him. Nothing good ever comes from being different.

“This means you protected yourself,” Professor Black insists, “You know that a Horcrux is a container for a person's soul. But that does not automatically make the container evil. Yes, it can be tainted by this foul magic, but that is only if there are no other protections on it. Harry, you are a living thing with your own magic – strong magic at that. Your magic is going to protect you the best that it can. Likely it mutated a bit to contain your core from the Horcrux.

“You also have your Mother's protection as well. There is rarely any stronger magic than a Mother's sacrifice. It is extremely powerful, if unpredictable magic. It can manifest in many different ways. Here it protected you from Voldemort's magic. That would have only helped your magic protect you from the Horcrux's influence.

“The burns you inflicted on Quirrell were unfortunate, but it was also a strong protection in saving your life. Even Lightest spell can kill if the situation demands it. In any case, it was the shock of Voldemort leaving his host that killed him, not you. No the burns would not have been pleasant. There is every chance that they would be damaging and likely scarring. But his death is not your fault.”

Harry doesn't know what to think about all of this. It all feels like too much information at once. He has spent all this time understanding what he is, what he can do. Now he is being told that he is wrong. That he isn't a monster like he thought. He isn't useless or worthless. That everything that has been crowding his thoughts and drowning him is wrong.

“The only power in your body is your own,” Professor Snape says, “You are the only person who gets to decide what you are going to do with it. No one else. No outside force nor any unconscious inside force. Only you.”

Only him. Only Harry. It is almost hard to imagine. He has never been in charge of anything in his own life. That is what made it so easy to believe that this terrible power inside of him was controlling people whether he wished it or not. Because what else can Harry control in his life? Not much. Not the truly important bits. “But what about my names?” he asks. Because that is one of the top things that Harry has no control over. One of the things that seems to control him instead.

“How do the names work?” Professor Snape asks.

Harry huffs in frustration at that. Why is he asking? Everyone knows how they work, if not the true way they appear. Still he answers, “The names appear on your wrist when you are born. Some people have one, some people have two. Other people have none at all. One is supposed to be your soulmate. The other is suppose to be your enemy. There is no way to tell what name is which. No one can explain them beyond that.”
“Correct. And have you ever heard of people sharing a soulmate before?”

Harry looks questioningly at him. Share a soulmate? Yes, there are triad bonds out there, but those are suppose to be rare. And complicated because it's not as if you can have two soulmate names on your wrist. So you have one and the other person might have yours. Or they might have someone else's. And a third person might have one or the other. Maybe a person has no names at all, but both people have their name. There are endless possibilities and all of them include work for the relationship to settle and to grow. There is always a touch of scandal around them as well. “It's rare, isn't it?” he asks.

“Yes,” Professor Snape nods, “it is. And there are some people that do not believe they exist at all, but that the people are going against the magic of the names. However, that is not the point right now. Have you ever heard of people sharing an enemy's name?”

Harry pauses to think about that. He... he isn't sure about that one. Again there are stories. More stories about that than about sharing a soulmate. It's not seen as quite as scandalous. He remembers the stories he use to read, when he was hiding from Dudley and his gang in the school library. Stories of the two heroes teaming up to defeat the bad guy. They may have never have heard of each other before they met, tracking the bad guy down. Then they would go on the quest to defeat him. It was all very grand. But has he ever heard of it happening outside of a story book? He doesn't think so. “In books,” he answers.

Professor Black walks over to join him on the couch. “It can happen in more than books. It is a recorded phenomenon, although most people don't even realize it. Because names are not talked about, they never know that they may share an enemy with someone. Just because they are your enemy doesn't mean that you have to confront them about it after all.” As he talks he begins to roll up the sleeves to his shirt.

Harry watches, eyes riveted to the sight. It is clear what he is doing, but why? Can he really mean that...? He can't even seem to finish the question in his own head. Part of him is nervous. Showing your names is suppose to be a big deal. It isn't something you do casually. He has never seen another person's name. Yes he has been told, but he has never seen it before.

Professor Black deftly unties the cuffs that cover the names. Something about them remind Harry of his own. He wonders if they have the same protections that his does. It seems likely. Maybe even more. Professor Black had a much more dangerous job before, defeating Voldemort.

He slips the first one off and shows it to Harry. Severus Snape it reads. That one is no surprise. He already knows that those two are soulmates. But it is when he shows Harry his other wrist that he stops breathing. Tom Riddle. It stands out boldly against the pale of his skin.

Tom Riddle.

Harry's thoughts are in a whirl. Without much thought he takes his own cuff off so that he can compare them side by side. Tom Riddle. It looks identical to Harry's. The same name, the same style of writing, the same bold black, everything. Everything about these two names are the same. It is enough to make Harry's head spin. He begins to feel slightly lightheaded. Dizzy, as if the world has picked up speed around him.

“I have known Tom Riddle was my enemy since I was twelve. That was the year I knew Severus was mine, no matter how stubbornly he denied it.” He smirks, “The last thing he wanted at the time was another Black you see. But I was stubborn and refused to be pushed away. Of course it was work, but anything with Severus is.”
“Thank you ever so much dear,” Professor Snape drawls.

Harry has to cover his mouth to stop the giggles from coming out. Those two are ridiculous. Sometimes he thinks that they do it on purpose.

Professor Black winks at him. “But it was worth it.” Then he sobers, looking serious again, “I learned just who Tom Riddle was when I was seventeen and already Marked – both of us were. By then it was too late or so I thought. That was around the time I learned of Voldemort's Horcruxes. That was when we vowed to stop him, no matter the cost.”

Harry can't seem to take his eyes off of Professor Black's wrist. His thoughts are racing too fast for him to keep track of them all, it seems like. Tom Riddle. Professor Black has Tom Riddle on his wrist – his enemy. Even if Tom Riddle wasn't Voldemort, wasn't evil, he still wouldn't be Professor Black's soulmate. He and Professor Snape fit too well together.

Can that mean that Harry can still be Voldemort's soulmate, even with this revelation? Even someone's enemy is allowed to have a soulmate of their own, surely? But for the first time he feels the beginning of doubt start to bloom in him. It feels the same as his hope – fragile and dangerous. As if this could be true. As if he could have this. As if he doesn't have to worry about being evil or a monster or anything like that.

Maybe the two feelings are really one and the same. Professor Black has Tom Riddle as an enemy. Why can't Harry? Professor Black was Marked by Voldemort and he broke away. So why can't Harry? Maybe, even if this is true, even if he might be Voldemort's soulmate, who says he has to accept it? He doesn't believe in soulmates anymore. Not the way he should. So why should he accept that he is Voldemort's? That he is Tom Riddle's?

Maybe this means that Tom Riddle truly is his enemy. Maybe it doesn't. But either way, Harry doesn't have to accept it. He is a fighter. A survivor. Yes, some days he wishes he wasn't, but that doesn't change it. He is a fighter. He fights every day of his life for something or other. What makes this any different? Why give up now?

Hope is a terrible thing. But, sometimes, it can be wonderful as well.

“If I had realized just how much this was bothering you, I would have shown you much sooner,” Professor Black chides gently.

Harry ducks his head, but the words don't mean much to him. Not now, with everything else in the way. Not with the other information he has just been given. Not with the revelation he just had. And really, it isn't as if they don't know about his trust issues either. Are they really surprised?

“Time to go back to bed now,” Professor Snape says, breaking Harry out of his thoughts, “It will not do for you to have a relapse.”

Harry jumps at that, not expecting it. Honestly, he sort of forgot that he wasn't alone, there for a moment. He bites his lip nervously, wanting to ask, but not sure if he should. Not sure why he is still here. Surely he has taken up enough of their time already.

“Yes Potter?” Professor Snape asks.

“Yes Sir, but when,” he swallows, “when will I be going back to class? And why am I here and not the Hospital Wing?” he asks quickly.

“To the latter, you are here because this is where you are most comfortable. Am I right in assuming you would not want Madam Pomfrey – or anyone else – to find out about your nightmares?”
Harry nods.

“You had a high fever by the time you were found. That means you were delirious most of the time until it could be gotten under control. If you had stayed in the Hospital Wing, I can assure you that others would be much more aware of the issues you have. That includes the Headmaster as well. I am sure Poppy would have had something to say to him if she knew even half about what you raved about.”

Harry can feel himself blushing in embarrassment, but also feeling dread at the mere thought of it. The last thing he wants is for the Headmaster to know anything more about him than he already does. Especially something like this. That would be a disaster, he is sure. He meddles far too much for it to be otherwise.

“As to the latter, you will be going back to classes after Christmas Break.”

“What? No!” Harry jerks his head up to look at him, horrified. After Break? No, he can't. He is already drowning in everything already. How is he going to survive after, with all the work he will miss? And what about his projects? Will he fail them?

“Do you believe that you are the first student to have a break down over their OWLs? Or to become seriously sick?” Professor Snape raises an eyebrow at him, “Because I assure you, you are not. We Professors are well equipped to handle this. Not only that, you have been dangerously sick for two weeks. This is also the first time you have been both awake and lucid. Your body needs time to recover from that. Missing the three weeks before the end of the term is not going to be as disastrous as you believe. Neither I nor Regulus will allow you to fail anything because of this.”

“Professor McGonagall is willing to grade you on the work you have already done,” Professor Black says next, “You and Ms Granger will write separate essays, but two that will be meant to be read together. You two may discuss it, although not for as long as I am sure Ms Granger would wish.

“As well, Mr Longbottom has already been discussing the possibility of spending break here so that the two of you may work. We will be providing you with your other school work. Any book that is not available in our own library can be borrowed and read here. Do not panic over this. You will not fail, understand?”

Harry nods, although it is more automatic then believing. Don't panic? Easy for them to say. But something in him also settles at their reassurance. They will watch him. They won't let him fall. They will catch him if he does. He may not understand why they bother, but he knows they will.

“Rest,” Professor Snape says, “The ginger menaces and Ms Lovegood will not be allowed to see you otherwise. And if they try to sneak into our quarters one more time, I am going to hang them by their toes to the ceiling,” he grumbles.

Harry can't help the smile he gives at that. Yes, that sounds exactly like them. “Yes Sir,” he says and stands. Quickly he has to grab onto Professor Black for support because the world spins around him. Oh. So that would be what Professor Snape is talking about then. Yes, he still obviously needs to recover. Professor Black stands and wraps an arm around Harry's shoulder for support. “Come now, time to sleep. We can talk more later.”

“We will be talking more later,” Professor Snape adds firmly.

It sounds like both a promise and a threat. Harry can't say that he is looking forward to it. If he thought their talks were bad before, they are sure to be nothing like they will be now. Goody. Still he doesn't protest. Not that there would be a point to it, even if he did.
“And Potter, what have I said about my name?” he asks.

Harry blinks for a moment at that. Oh. “It is Severus, not Sev?”

“Yes. Make sure that you remember that in the future.”

Professor Black chuckles as he herds Harry back into bed. “However, I am fine with Reg if you should ever desire, just not Reggy.” He makes a face at that.

Harry remembers that Black once called him that. He didn't react well. “Yes Sir.”

Professor Black tucks him in. “Sleep well. Call if you need anything.”

Harry can already feel his eyes begin to close. He had thought that he would have trouble falling asleep, with everything he has learned. Clearly his body has other ideas. “Night Reg,” he slurs, already mostly asleep.

A smooth laugh. A hand to his hair. “Goodnight Harry.”

Harry sleeps.

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It is hard having a long held belief torn from you. It makes you feel as if the ground has been pulled out from under your feet. As if the Earth has come off its axis. Nothing seems quite right after that. After all, if one thing can change, why can't all of it? You have known it for so long and with such conviction, how can it possibly be a lie?

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True to their word, neither Severus nor Regulus let him drown in school work. He suspects that the number of assignments have been reduced on purpose, but he can't prove it. He doesn't know if he wants to prove it. He is busy enough without it. Technically he is still on bed rest, but that doesn't change the fact that he is still working on essays and such.

To keep him from being too restless, he is allowed to move to the couch to work, but for the first week that is the extent of it. Nor is he allowed to study for too long. Taking breaks helps avoid stress apparently, or so he's been told. Multiple times. Usually when his books are being forcibly taken away from him. Regulus has taken to accusing him of pouting when he does.

Harry can't help it though. Everything is so boring without anything to do. He isn't allowed to wander around. Everyone is in class. He can't study continuously. The only option left is to read something else. Fortunately Regulus was not joking about their library. There is an entire room dedicated to Severus' and Regulus' books. Not as impressive as the Black library, but still impressive nonetheless. Enough to have something to do.

And then there is the talking. True to his word, Severus does indeed begin talking to Harry more. Much more. If someone were to ask Harry, he would say too much in fact. It's just a shame that no one asked him. It is just as much fun as he had been expecting it to be – that is, not at all. Add to the fact the Severus insists on them talking every other night and Harry sort of dreads those evenings.
It is a good thing Regulus teaches Astronomy so that he is able to be with Harry during the day while Severus is teaching. Then, when Regulus has to leave for office hours before class, Severus is there. Harry feels as if he is being very managed. Pass back and forth like a ball two children are playing with. It is enough to make him dizzy some days.

The lack of privacy is enough to about drive him out of his skin as well. Not to say that they will not respect his wish to be alone if he so desires. But there seems to be a limit on that. And even when he is technically alone, he is aware that there is always someone present, just out of view. Almost as if they are hovering. Judging. Ready to condemn him as soon as he does something wrong. Not that they are, but it is enough to make him feel that is what they are doing.

Fortunately he does not always have to deal with them alone. Harry considers it a minor miracle, but the twins, Luna and Draco are all allowed into their quarters to visit him. Not alone of course. Either Severus or Regulus are always there. But they are still able to spend time together. Harry suspects it has something to do with them making sure that he does not isolate himself. Severus has mentioned the importance of that a few times. This is obviously his way.

It is always interesting when they come. Luna still insists on gluing herself to his side. Although now she is satisfied with sitting beside him on the couch. The twins attempt to keep him laughing continuously. Be it with their antics, their bantering, their jokes, clearly their goal is to make Harry laugh as much as possible. They also give him any help he may need with his work. They have a knack for explaining anything he may not understand better than some of the Professors. Then again, that may be because he is so use to the George and Fred's language, he understands them better.

Draco is another matter entirely. He doesn't really talk much when any of the others are there. Not as in a I-am-too-good-for-you kind if way, but a thoughtful, watching way. As if he is observing all he can to use the knowledge later. Harry can't think that it is that helpful, but it must be because Draco never complains about it. He has also gotten better about not being such a right prat all the time. He still has his moments, but Harry suspects that he always will. Some might even find it charming.

Harry is still waiting though. He doesn't know what to think. Just like he doesn't know what to think about Regulus insisting that Riddle isn't his soulmate. And Severus insisting that there is no great evil power inside of him. He is still waiting to see about that too. Thinking and gathering new information. Part of him wants to believe it, desperately so. But the other part of him is much more cautious. That is the part of him that knows what happens when he hopes too much. Disappointment always follows somehow.

Still, it is pleasant, generally speaking, to have them join him in their quarters. He doesn't feel quite as itchy and as judged when they are there. Of course they can't always be there. They have their own studies and hobbies as well. But it is always nice when they come.

It startles him when he realizes that he is slowly beginning to think of these quarters as his. They certainly feel more like a home than anywhere else. Most certainly the Dursleys, but even the dorms or the room at Grimmauld Place. There, in the first room that was ever his, comes the closest to feeling like home. But something had been missing. Now, in the spare bedroom he has been living in, it comes together for him. It looks like his room, not just a room he is staying in.

It scares him, feeling this. It is dangerous, just like the hope is dangerous. How does he know this will last? What guarantee does he have that this day will not be the day that they tire of him? That it will not be the day when, once again, he loses something he thought was secure. He doesn't. And so he waits for the other shoe to drop. Even as he laughs and smiles and cautiously feels like maybe, just maybe, he might belong here, he waits.

It feels as if he has been waiting his whole life practically. And he is right, there always ends up
being something. But now he is so tired of waiting. It is what he lives by, but that doesn't mean that
he has to like it. It just means that he has to do it.

And so he carries on.

One thing, as much as he dislikes his and Severus' talks, they do seem to be helping. At least they are
if his nightmares are anything to go by. They are still present and they still chill him to the bone.
Riddle is still there whispering in his ear. But they do seem to be decreasing again. And changing.
Riddle isn't always at the center of them now. The first time he gets a nightmare about the Dementors
he about cries from the relief of it all. Yes, no nightmare is a good nightmare, but at least it wasn't
Riddle.

At least it wasn't Riddle. At least it was something else. Thank Merlin. Some people might point out
how messed up that is. They wouldn't be wrong. Harry knows that it is. But when hasn't something
in his life been messed up? He has never lived in a fairy tale, no matter what the Wizarding World
thought when he was younger. No happily ever after for him.

It brings to mind the tale of Cinderella. That was his favorite story when he was younger. The young
girl, forced to work for the people that should have taken care of her, going to the Ball and finding
her Prince. He would have to have been blind not to see the similarities. He had hoped for the same,
secretly. Then his mind would inevitably point out that she wasn't a Freak. She got her happily ever
after because she was normal. She deserved it. She wasn't a burden or a Freak like Harry was.

It was only on the surface that they were similar. Still that didn't stop him from reading the story over
and over again until he memorized it. He knew all the stories in those books. He never cared that
they were 'girl stories'. Stories about Princesses finding their soulmates and their happiness. That was
what Harry wanted. What he wished for for so long. One person. Just one person to love him as he
was.

Now he knows there is no such thing. Not in the real world. Nothing is ever so simple. Still, late at
night when he can't sleep, when he wakes up gasping for breath, he can't help but hope. Can't help
but wish for it again.

It is foolish he knows. A waste of time and effort. But like a weed, once hope begins to grow inside
of him again, it spreads. It infects things that it has no business touching. Choking out sensibility and
making him more daring with his dreams instead. It is both a hindrance and a joy to have. The
difference between the two is enough to give him a headache, so he tries to avoid overthinking it. He
has had enough of headaches for some time now.

One thing that has improved significantly is his appetite. He is now able to eat more and not get sick
at the mere thought of food. To help his stomach settle after his erratic eating pattern followed by his
sickness, small bowls of food are usually set around the rooms. Generally fruit or nuts, something
healthy and filling. He can see an improvement as the days go on.

Severus is pleased with the progress. He even mentioned that, if this continues, he will be able to
take Harry off of his nutrient potion before the start of next term.

The thought makes Harry glad and not just because that means that Severus will not have to brew it
anymore for him. He has found himself... wanting his approval lately. It is another thing that has
Harry worried. He wants to please Severus. To make him proud of him. And Regulus. He wants the
same with him.

It scares him because how can he? He is nothing to be proud of. No one ever has before. How can
he do it now? How can he be enough? He is still half convinced that there is something making them
like him somehow. Some power forcing them to seem to care for him, no matter what Severus says. What else explains all of this? This is far beyond the call of a Professor. This is, well, what a parent would do. A real parent, not like the Dursleys. A parent with a child that they actually want.

It has him thinking of the adoption again. Can they, can they really mean it? Can they really want this? Want him? Why? It doesn't seem possible. Surely they would want someone better than him. Like Draco for example. He may be a prat, but he knows what he is doing. He has been raised in it. Why not adopt him? Make him the Black heir? He knows that they are related. And yes, he is already going to be Lord Malfoy when he reaches majority. Can someone be a Lord of two Houses? It can't be that complicated surely.

Draco is someone who won't embarrass them. Someone that they can be proud of. Even when he was a right arse to Harry, he knew that he wasn't completely irredeemable. Wasn't unloveable or a burden like Harry himself was.

Or if not Draco than someone else. Surely there must be better people out there for this. But still they continue to act as his parents, not just his Professors. It is just like at Grimmauld Place, if a bit more intense. Not as if they are proving anything, but as if they are even more focused on him.

Harry would have thought that it would be the opposite. They have other responsibilities here after all. To their students – teaching, grading homework, being Head of House, offering advice and guidance when needed, detentions, everything. And at the beginning of the year, that was true, it seemed. But now that he is living with them again, they spend a significant amount of time with him. Even if they aren't talking, just doing their respective work at the same table, they are still there.

He wonders if this is what having a family is supposed to feel like. He isn't entirely sure. All he knows comes from watching his Aunt and Uncle with his cousin. From listening to his friends stories, from his dorm mates talk. They all seem so very different from one another. How are you supposed to know which is the right one? If you belong or not.

But maybe there isn't only one way to be a family. Maybe there are multiple ways. And maybe, just maybe, this is one of them. Harry doesn't know for sure. He refuses to ask. But he hopes so anyways.

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Hope, though fragile, is hard to kill.

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Before Harry knows it, break has started and the majority of the students have gone home for the holidays. Of course there always those students that stay over, but for the most part, Hogwarts is now empty. Strangely enough, it makes her feel more alive than ever.

Harry is finally off of his bed rest and allowed to roam again. That doesn't stop his friends from hovering slightly to make sure he doesn't get sick again. Well, mostly. Each in their own way at least. The first day the twins drag them outside for an epic snowball fight. Harry has a blast with that. It is their usual group with Fred, George and Luna plus Longbottom and Draco this year. The whole thing is ridiculous, but he doesn't care. It feels good to be out and playing.

He is soaked through by time they calls it a tie and go back inside. There they are met with warm tea
and blankets from a stern looking Severus. He fusses over them all, making sure that they are warm and dry. He tells them it is so that he doesn't get sick making potions for foolish dunderheads, but Harry doesn't believe him. He can claim all he wants that he doesn't fuss, he most certainly does. True, it looks different on him then on other people, but that doesn't make it any less true. Severus Snape fusses over people.

It is rather entertaining to watch. The others look anywhere from bemused to happy to cheeky about it, each by their own personality and how use to Severus they are. Longbottom, naturally, is the bemused, and slightly scared, one. The twins are as entertained as Harry is. Luna just obeys cheerfully while Draco subtly rolls his eyes about the whole thing.

He and Longbottom take advantage of the near empty library and spread out, digging through any book that might help them. Their notes are getting a bit ridiculous. Fortunately Regulus has shown them a handy spell that organizes them into what is essentially a notebook. Harry then introduced Longbottom to the joys of Muggle stationery – highlighters and stick it notes and such. All of them are being used liberally at this point. Their notes look like a rainbow got sick on them.

If it were not for the others, they might have camped out in there. But they aren't allowed. Everyone takes turns dragging them out for food and breaks. Harry suspects that there is a schedule between all of them. It is likely a good thing or the words might start swimming in front of Harry's eyes again. Too much stress was part of what triggered all of his problems the last time. He would rather not go through that again. Especially not so soon after the last time.

Still, for all that he is doing school work, there is something almost peaceful about it. Longbottom has none of Granger's frantic energy to do everything at once and so thoroughly that it is bleeding from all the questions. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing. Now that Harry no longer has to deal with it, he has an easier time appreciating how dedicated she is. There is little doubt that she will succeed in anything she puts her mind to. That doesn't mean she isn't completely exhausting to work with.

It also helps that he no longer has to deal with the added stress of her broken expectations. Or her misunderstanding. It is a weight off of his shoulders. Working with Longbottom is much more relaxing. He has all of her passion with none of her whirls, as Luna insists on telling her. Constantly. It is likely a sign that she has probably been spending too much time with George and Fred, but oh well. It happens.

Even though Harry is better, he hasn't gone back to the dorms to sleep. Part of him keeps waiting for Severus and Regulus to tell him to go. That they want their quarters back. That they are tired of him invading their space. But that hasn't happened yet. They give no sign that they want him gone. So Harry stays and goes on as he has been.

He isn't in a hurry to leave although he knows he should. It wouldn't do for him to overstay his welcome. They might finally decide they have had enough then. But he can't seem to bring himself to. Something stops him each time. The hope that never seems to die for him. Every time he thinks that it is gone for good, it proves him wrong. It comes back, setting Harry up for failure all over again.

Which is why he watches and waits. He doesn't say anything about it, but nor does he take anything for granted. He's not ungrateful after all. Only ungrateful people take things for granted. They don't appreciate the things they have, always wanting more and more.

The Dursleys always liked to tell Harry he was an ungrateful Freak. Always taking up time and energy and resources that they could be using elsewhere. On more deserving people. Normal people, who weren't Freaks like him. Usually his cousin. His cousin was used as an example of someone
worthy frequently. It never worked the way they wanted it to. Despite how much Harry wanted to be normal, be worthy of someone's love, he was always glad that he was nothing like Dudley. He never seemed like he was a good role model to look up to.

So Harry waits and watches, but they never say anything.

His days fall into a sort of pattern. He and Longbottom get up and study in the mornings until lunch. Then they are dragged away to eat either in the Great Hall or the kitchens, depending on what they feel like. In the afternoons, instead of going back to the library like they should, Harry is exiled from school work and told to play. The twins and Luna follow these instructions with glee. Draco is much more dignified about it, but that doesn't change the fact that he does the same. Longbottom is basically along for the ride at this point.

It hasn't escaped Harry's notice that the boy is slowly becoming a new part of their group. There is nothing said about it, no one ever sits down and makes a decision. But he is included more and more into their activities. He shares more and more of their jokes. He learns twin speak and Luna speak. He learns to ignore Draco if he is in a prissy mood. He relaxes more around them than before.

Harry finds, much to his surprise, that he doesn't mind. Not really. Hadn't he chosen Longbottom because he was the best of the Gryffindors in their year? The least stressful. Harry doesn't have to be constantly on his guard around him. He never laughs or pokes at him. Never sneers or makes cruel remarks. When Harry has bad days and doesn't want to get out of bed, he is right there with the others to support him.

And oh how Harry loathes those days. The days when everything is too much and too heavy and too everything. When the only safe place is his bed. And not even there because the thoughts in his head threaten to drown him. The world is a sea of grey and smoke. Why bother? What's the point?

He loathes those days with a passion. They had never been that bad before. Yes, sometimes – often if he is being honest – he wished that he didn't have to get up. Didn't have to face the world. But he always did. It never seemed like an impossible task then, only an unpleasant chore. Now it is almost as if the very world is weighing him down. Severus tells him that it is a symptom of his depression flaring up. Harry wishes he could pour some water on it and be done with it.

Those are the days he spends on the couch, curled up with his friends around him. The days that food is thick, warm soups and endless tea. They never act as if he is a bother when this happens, although surely he must. Surely they must see how weak he is. How pathetic. But they never say anything. They never even look like they want to. They are all there, whether he wants them or not – Longbottom included.

Then, in the evenings, after supper, he goes back to his – the – quarters to spend time with Severus and Regulus. Sometimes he studies. Sometimes they talk. It is not all Severus dragging up his past or dark thoughts. There are questions on how his day went and what he is thinking and if he is enjoying himself. Normal things like that. Regulus continues to talk to him about parseltongue. He even brings some books from the Black library for Harry to read. Severus has him help with potions.

They both begin to teach Harry how to play wizarding chess. He is absolutely terrible at it in the beginning. The games are very short and merciless. But they always explain to him what went wrong and how he can improve. Regulus and Severus play a game for him to observe and it is possibly one of the most fascinating things Harry has ever seen. For one thing, both are top strategists. For another thing, it is clear that they know each other very well. The game lasts for hours before Regulus finally wins by a move.

It makes him feel like so much as if he is a part of a family that he thinks he might burst. It makes him
feel as if he belongs. Does he? Can he? Can he ever really belong anywhere? Is it possible for him? For the longest time, he would think not. He has never belonged anywhere before. Not with his relatives. Not with his House. Not with the other students. Nowhere. There was no place for a Freak like him. Now he wonders if he has finally found a place. If he can trust this. If it will last.

As always, he is at war with himself as he debates this. Part of him desperately wants to. Wants to trust this. Wants to keep this. Wants to finally have something that he can call his own. The other part is suspicious. Distrustful. How can he know this will last? That they won't get tired of him. That they will want to keep him and to treat him well. Not that he thinks they would ever go so far as to abuse him, but, well, what if he turns into that pair of shoes? The ones that you use to like but are now worn out or don't fit anymore. Who keeps those? If they aren't given away or thrown away, they are tossed into a corner and forgotten.

It exhausts Harry just thinking about it. He wishes he could just make up his mind. Then he could move on with it. But he doesn't know and he doesn't know how to find out either. How does one go about testing something like this? He could act out if he really wanted to know, but everything in him protesters at the idea. He cringes at the mere thought. Test Severus and Regulus? Push their boundaries on purpose? He could, he knows he could, but it is so terrifying and so distasteful that he doesn't know if he could go through with it. Besides, he knows how terrifying they can be when angered. Can he handle that?

Something to keep in mind then, but not something to follow through with. Yet. Maybe if he becomes too desperate then he will. But for now he suffers his indecision in silence.

One surprise that takes place over the holidays is that Fawkes visits him. This isn't the first time he has seen the phoenix since his second year, but it's not as if there are frequent visits or anything like that. Harry wouldn't expect there to be. Fawkes is suppose to be Dumbledore's familiar after all, or so he has heard. And even if he isn't then surely he is attached to Dumbledore in some way.

So it was a bit of a shock to have Fawkes burst in on him one afternoon. It is right after lunch and they have moved to the Astronomy Tower to watch it snow. The others had been talking, but Harry wasn't really paying attention. He had been sitting on the edge, one leg dangling over, absently watching the snowflakes drift past. His mind had been too full and too empty all at once. The burst of flame startles him and before he knows it, Fawkes is standing in front of him, singing.

Harry can't help but smile at that. And yes, he knows that is what a phoenix song is for, to make you feel happy. Peaceful. Whole. But he can't help but feel that it is different for him. That, for once, being special isn't a bad thing. That he is worthy of a special song, just for him. Of course he knows that he is being foolish, but it doesn't stop the thoughts.

It is only after he stops singing and snuggles up – for lack of a better description – to Harry that he notices the others are watching him. There is an awed look in their eyes as they do. It makes him duck his head so that they cannot see his face. They shouldn't be looking at him like that. As if he is something worthy of that. He isn't. He never was and he never will be. After an awkward pause, they go back to pretending like nothing unusual is happening.

Fawkes is a rather frequent visitor after that. He keeps popping up and joining Harry in whatever he is doing. He never seems bothered if Harry pays him any mind or not. He simply seems to enjoy being around him. It's odd.

It also has Regulus joking about him choosing a career in Magical Creatures. “They certainly seem to like you enough.”

Harry makes a face at him. It isn't his fault that he seems to attract the oddities – first Fawkes, then
the Thestrals and the unicorns. Maybe even the Basilisk if he wants to go that far. None of those are his fault. There is no need to mock him about it.

But Regulus just smiles. “Think about it. There are plenty of jobs that would love to have someone with a natural talent for creatures. It wouldn't even matter if you didn't have an OWL in it. There is always an independent study option. And some of the jobs that are available for parselmouths overlap in any case.”

Harry just nods. It would be... different, that's for sure. And maybe not even a bad different at that.

Overall, it is one of the best Christmases – one of the best breaks – he has ever had. Everyone likes their gifts, which is a relief, especially Draco, Severus and Regulus. They are the hardest to shop for. But now he knows what to get the twins and Luna. And for Longbottom, he goes for the obvious, but also obviously appreciated, gift of Herbology. It is rather hard to go wrong there.

Longbottom surprises him as well, having given him some candles. Each comes with a card explaining what they are suppose to be for – sleep, calming thoughts, energy. Things like that. Not something he was expecting, but considering that Longbottom is the expert, he'll take his word for it that they work.

Before Harry knows it, break is over and a new term is about to begin.

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Rage. Rage against the dying light.
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It is odd, being back in classes again. Being at a desk, listening to his Professor's lecture, just being a normal student. Or as normal as he can get anyways. There is a definite adjustment period to it. Both Regulus and Severus have a different way of teaching when they only have one student to teach. It is more discussion than lecture and then a practical. Yes, he was getting most of his information from a book, but they also made sure that he always understood what he was reading.

It was both intimidating – to have all of their focus wholly on him – and informative – less pressure to complete the spell as quickly as possible and more time to fully understand it all. A different teaching method to be sure, but Harry thinks that he might like it better than the traditional way. Not that he could see it going well with a regular class. And not that he thinks it would work with every Professor and every class. But still, for all that he hates being signaled out, Harry enjoyed it.

Now he is back to taking notes and keeping his head down. And yes, he knows that his Professors will answer a question if he asks, but he won't. Not in front of everyone. And not when he thinks that it might be a stupid question. Or a waste of their time. Not when everyone can stare and judge.

Some adults might say there is no such thing as a stupid question, but Harry knows that there is. Severus has confirmed this as well. Sure, some of that might be because he has so little patience sometimes, but not all. He has heard some questions that are enough to make even him cringe, let alone his Professors.

Besides, if he truly cannot figure it out, he knows that either Regulus or Severus will be willing to help him. He still spends part of his evenings with them, even if he is back to sleeping in the dorms.
He surprises himself to find just how much he misses their quarters. He didn't realize just how safe he felt there until he left them. There he knew that nothing would happen to him. They wouldn't let it. But outside their rooms – in the halls and classes and dorms – it is another story. He never knows when someone is going to have a problem with him again. How they are going to act on that problem.

Nowhere is safe. Not even in the common room. Too many enemies there. It is funny, in a way. One of the places he should feel the safest and he feels as if he is in the most danger. The danger always seems to vary from year to year, but it is always the same. He is never welcomed there. Not really. The best he can hope for is to be ignored, not taunted or hurt.

Fortunately for him, right now they have collectively decided to ignore him. That is fine with Harry. He is use to being alone.

Though, he should say they mostly decide to leave him alone. Draco is still talking to him. Or sometimes just sitting with him, neither of them saying a thing. They might study or they might silently watch the fire, but they don't always talk.

Zabini is also back to talking at Harry. At because Harry has stopped responding to him. He doesn't want to do this anymore. He is tired of it. So he hopes that if he doesn't respond, than he will get bored. He used the same tactics on Dudley and his gang when he was younger. And on all those kids who decided to laugh at him for whatever reason. That is an important lesson he has learned. If you don't give a bully what they want, then eventually they will get bored. Or most of them will. Sometimes there are those who don't care. They take pleasure in it, no matter what you do.

One thing he has found though, that he can escape that problem by sitting with Nott. He never minds, tolerating Harry more than the rest of his Housemates. He never glares or silently threatens. That doesn't mean he is overly welcoming or enthusiastic, but Harry doesn't need that. He needs some peace to work.

He's never noticed this before, but he is fairly sure that Zabini is afraid of Nott. Not cautious or wary but actually afraid of him. There is something in his eyes sometimes. A quick flash before he covers it up again. Harry only saw it a few times and it took awhile for him to realize what it was. He wonders what Nott did to him to deserve that look.

Still Nott never troubles Harry any. He always nods to him before going back to his books whenever he sits down at his table. It helps him relax some. Not because he thinks that Nott will defend him, but he knows that he will defend himself. If there is a chance that he will get caught in the crossfire, Nott will fight back. And Harry has a strong hunch that Nott is a vicious fighter when he wants to be. It makes him glad that he has never been an enemy, just a disinterested bystander.

“Alright Potter?” he had asked that first day of term when Harry sat next to him.

Harry nodded as he arranged his books.

“Good. Don't let those idiots get to you. Most can't tell their arse from their head.” His tone is matter of fact before he returns his attention back to his own work.

That makes Harry smirk. Nott isn't exactly wrong. Some of their Housemates aren't exactly the brightest. Nor are some of their classmates for that matter. They could make a flobberworm look like a genius.

Another thing that Harry finds funny, in a bitter sort of way, is the way his Housemates have taken the news of his names. With the way everyone was assuming that he was Voldemort's soulmate, it
would seem a safe assumption to make that he would be more popular. After all, Voldemort may be
dead, but his ideals and ideas are not. He still has supporters out there. As his soulmate, he should
have been accepted by them. But he wasn't. Either because they didn't believe it or because they just
do not like him, he isn't sure. But it hardly matters when they acted as if they hated him just as much
as everyone else.

With this new term brought the next step of Harry and Longbottom's DADA project. They are
officially beginning to brew. Severus has given them a schedule of when they are able to come and
brew in the classroom. As they work, he sits at his desk and grades, scowling darkly at the essays as
he does.

It doesn't go quite as planned honestly. Yes Harry knew this was going to be tough. He knew it was
going to be work. Quite a bit of work. But even with all the research and reading they did before, he
still managed to underestimate just how much work it will be.

Their first couple of times are a complete disaster. Nothing explodes fortunately, but it is a close call.
That takes them right back to the books to see what went wrong. It also shows Harry that they need a
comprehensive study of what ingredients will react with what. He buries himself in potion books,
beginning to put together some kind of chart they can use.

Well, he says buries, but not literally. For one, his schedule is still being managed to make sure he
does not get too overwhelmed again. Harry is fairly sure that Severus and Regulus recruited his
friends to help with that. He is never left alone for too long before they come for him. For another, he
still has other class work he needs to complete. The OWLs are looming even closer now and no one
will let them forget it.

One weight off of his mind is his and Granger's Transfiguration project. They received an EE for
their efforts. He can tell Granger is disappointed that it isn't an O, but Harry is just relieved. He didn't
fail it. He didn't ruin his Transfiguration grade for the year. Regulus smiled when he told him and
Severus gave him an approving nod. Their work was solid and well thought out and well explained.
Any more work to get it up to an O and Harry might have gone mad.

Fawkes is still visiting Harry as well. He had thought that would end once classes started again, but
no. He still pops up from time to time, making Harry relax as he studies or sits in his Professor's
quarters at night. He is the one thing that makes it bearable when Severus insists on having their
talks, as Harry refers to them. He refuses to think of it as therapy. Therapy is for people that are
crazy. He's not crazy. He's not. Crazy people go to the asylum where they do all kinds of painful
experiments on you. His Uncle told him that when he was young. Threatened really. It scared Harry
back then, although he never showed it.

So he's not crazy and it isn't therapy of any kind. That doesn't make it anymore pleasant. Dragging
up his past never is. Nor is talking about the dark thoughts in his head. It is downright painful some
days. Fawkes' presence helps him when nothing else can. So he still doesn't know why he visits, but
he is grateful for it anyways.

Then one day not long after term starts, he gets another surprise – a note from Hagrid with a request
to visit him after classes. It is delivered along with the rest of the morning mail and Harry has to keep
the shock from his face. Hagrid wants to talk to him? Why? What could he possibly want?

He remembers how friendly – overly friendly maybe, but open and kind – he had been when he first
delivered Harry's letter. He remembers how wary he was in the years after, when he was Sorted into
Slytherin. Yes, he was the one who brought him back from the Forbidden Forest, but this can't be
about that surely. It wasn't as if he could have been worried about him. He is a slimy snake after all.
Voldemort's soulmate. Why would he worry?
But what else could it possibly be about? It's not as if he takes his class or anything. Does he want to yell at Harry? Not that he seems the type for that either. So why?

It makes his stomach cramp just thinking about it. It sticks in his mind all through the rest of the day. He pays attention in class, but just barely. It is almost ridiculous, how nervous he is about this. But nothing good generally comes from adults wanting to talk to him. Quite the opposite in fact. All it means is trouble of some kind.

So when class is over, he goes back to the dorm and changes into warm clothes to go outside. There is a light snowfall on the ground now. Nothing bad yet, but it will. Give it time and it always will. They have several snowstorms a winter here. Still right now it is mild compared to what it will be. His breath puffs out in front of him as he walks. It looks like a dragon's breath.

Snow crunches under his feet as he makes his way to Hagrid's hut. He hears the barking before he gets there and sees Fang running up to greet him. Harry keeps his footing as Fang – rather enthusiastically — says hello. Fortunately he doesn't lick Harry, so it doesn't freeze on him. But he bounds right up to him and tries to snuggle up.

Harry can't help but laugh as he pets him. Regulus better not find out about this or the teasing will get even worse. He means well of course. And Harry isn't truly hurt by it. But he would rather not give him any more fuel to add to the fire. He is actually at least half serious as he jokes about Harry being a 'creature tamer', as he puts it.

“Fang, no,” Hagrid says as he comes outside, “down ye silly brute. Don go knocking him over now.”

Fang obeys with a whine, dropping down and looking pitiful about it.

“Ello Arry,” he greets.

“Hello,” he says cautiously, watching. He doesn't look angry now, but that can change quickly enough. Moods can be as changeable as the tide with some people.

“Thanks fer coming down, I know yer probably busy, what with this being a big year and all. But I wanted ta show you something that I think ye will like. Follow me.” With that he starts off towards the Forbidden Forest.

Harry walks beside him, watching him from the corner of his eye. Just in case. Fang trots happily at his side, tongue hanging out. His head bumps against Harry's hand as they walk. He takes the hint and scratches his ears. Fang pants happily at that.

They stop at the edge of the Forest. Hagrid holds out a hand and Harry tenses, braced. But Hagrid points to a specific clump of trees. If he saw his flinch, then he doesn't show it. “Look there,” he says.

Harry obeys, squinting. At first he doesn't see anything besides the trees. There is nothing there. But as he waits, he sees a flash of white. Then, before he can process what he is seeing, three unicorns step into sight. And not just any three unicorns, but his unicorns. The ones who brought him back that day.

“They've been hanging around recently. I spect they've been looking for ye,” Hagrid tells him, “No other reason for them to be this close. Unicorns are shy creatures ye know. Don like being around people much. There's exceptions course and it looks like yer one. Go on and say ello then.”

Harry looks at Hagrid for a long moment, assessing. Making sure that he is serious. That this isn't
some kind of trap. Then he walks forward, towards the trees. The three unicorns come out to greet him. They look warily at Hagrid and Fang, as if they are assessing them too. Then they dismiss them, nuzzling Harry all over.

He laughs at that, feeling their fur against the skin of his face, his hands, anywhere there is skin. Anywhere they can reach really. It tickles. A grin threatens to take over his face. For once, he doesn’t fight it. He doesn’t need to. He already knows that he is safe here. Instinctively he knows his unicorns won’t let anything happen to him.

With playful shoves and laughing whinnies, they coax him into running around with them. It is not unlike the time he and Luna played with the Thestrals. He can’t help but laugh again. There is just something about playing with them that is freeing. As if everything else matters less when they are around.

Alright, so maybe Regulus has a point about him. Not that he is going to tell him that. He’ll be positively insufferable if he does.

He loses track of time as he moves and laughs and plays. It is only when Hagrid calls his name again that he realizes that he can no longer feel his nose. Regretfully he waves to signal that he heard and says goodbye to them. He doesn’t want to leave, but he knows that he has to. Who knows if he will ever see them again. It was a surprise enough that he saw them this time. It is likely that now that they have seen him safe they will leave him alone.

“Thought ye might like to see em again,” Hagrid says as he walks them back to the castle, “They’ve certainly been watching ye when ye’ve been out playing with yer friends. Interesting that it’s those three that have adopted ye, specially the two males. They’re twins ye know. Gave they’re Ma a fair bit of trouble when they were born. Twins are rare in unicorns. Most of time, if yer not careful, they won’t make it.”

Harry listen and Harry aches. Twins. A set of male twins and a girl unicorn. Those are the three that adopted him. He doesn’t say anything to that. He doesn’t think that he can. Merlin what is his life anymore? A bloody mess, that’s what. A bloody mess with some bloody wonderful pit stops along the way. Incredible.

Hagrid and Fang drop him off at the doors. “Feel free to come back and visit em. I can watch so ye don get into any trouble with anyone.” With that, he walks away, not looking back.

Harry stares after him for a long moment, processing everything before he goes back inside the castle to get some work done. He finds that he is humming as he goes, but he doesn’t stop. Today is a good day.

It is the next day at breakfast that he is reminded that, once again, nothing in his life is sacred. Or private. The public must feel as if they are entitled to everything in his life. Once again, as he eats, he feels eyes on him, growing more intense as every second passes.

Draco passes him the Daily Prophet and Harry can feel his stomach automatically begin to knot. But he sees that it is both better and worse than he thought it would be. It is certainly a change, that is for sure. There, in bold color, is a picture of Harry playing with the three unicorns. As he skims the article, he finds that it is a complete flip from what he has been so recently accused of. Instead of being Voldemort's soulmate, the newest incarnation of evil, he is a young and misunderstood boy. One who has endured the world's scorn and yet still has a pure soul. Because obviously no one who is so clearly loved by unicorns can be evil. They are too sensitive to deal with anything Dark.

That is why Muggles think that they are attracted to virgins – purity. But it is not purity of the body
that they are attracted to. It is purity of the soul.

He knew Hagrid said that they had good judgment before, but this? This is so much more than that. This claiming that this is proof, once and for all, that there is absolutely nothing Dark about him. There can't be. The unicorns wouldn't come anywhere near him if it were true. Proof that he isn't evil or destined to be the next Dark Lord or any of the things that he has been accused of recently.

If it is true, that is. If this isn't another pitch to make him into something that he is not. Another way to pin new expectations onto him. Or dust off the old ones, calling him their hero again. He glances at the others to see if they have anything to say.

Zabini is smirking at him, clearly entertained by this.

Draco nods. “For once the paper is right. Unicorns cannot abide anything Dark. It goes against their very nature. If they like you, then it is a rare thing that people treasure as long as they can. It is seen as a great honor. There is even such a thing as a unicorn blessing. That is seen as the greatest honor although no one is really sure what it is.”

Harry stares at him. Merlin, he is serious. This... this is real. People actually consider unicorns that good a judge of character that they are willing to drop weeks of hate and scorn to love him again. Just like that. Though then again, he shouldn't be surprised. The public has always been pretty fickle when it comes to him. They are like sheep, in that regard. Easily led. Why should this time be any different? Clearly it's not.

But as much as this newest article helps him, he can't help but feel annoyed by it. For one thing, why are people taking photos of him in the first place? What business of it is theirs, what he does with his time? None that's what. Nosiness is what started this mess to begin with. People not leaving well enough alone and invading his privacy. For another thing, this is all likely to change again, the next time someone comes forward with 'proof' that Harry is going Dark. Something will happen to convince people sooner or later. It always does. And then they will hate him again. For a third thing, why wouldn't people just leave him alone for once and for all?

He sighs and takes another bite of eggs. He knows that he should be used to this by now. But he isn't, not really. He's beginning to think that he never will be.

That's just life after all.

Life, in the end, is an ordinary thing. There are long stretches of boredom and routine in between all of the big events. Good or bad, life is filled with the small things. It is only because the because the big stuff take up so much room in our head that we think they are more than they are. The excitement, the tragedy, the laughter and tears, they are enough to drown the less memorable things out. It is the small things in life that count the most.

That's just life and life damn well can jump off a bloody cliff Harry decides.

Things are not going well. School is not going well. Studying is not going well. His DADA project is not going well. His sleep is not going well. His head space is not going well. Nothing is going
well.

As time comes closer and closer to the end of the year, Harry can feel the edges of darkness creeping back in. Panic tries to choke him, cutting off his air. Thoughts of failure and disappointment haunt both his nights and his days. Some days it threatens to drown him beneath its pitch black waves, never to see the light again.

Basically he is becoming stressed out of his mind and nothing else is helping with that stress. Not his friends. Not Severus and Regulus. Not the unicorns or Thestrals or Fawkes. Nothing. Sometimes all he can see is a giant countdown until the end of the year, when it will all come to an end. It doesn't help that no one will be quiet about the OWLs. Or the NEWTs, if they are seventh years. Apparently they are even worse than the OWLs. It's hardly reassuring, that.

Regulus has taken to telling him that parseltongue needs not a degree to use correctly. It's not something you can learn. Either you speak it or you don't. Everything else is just extra. And if he decides to accept the adoption, he needs no degree to become Lord Black either. So those are two paths he could choose that aren't riding on the OWLs. Plus his creatures will love him no matter what he scores.

Nor, if he decides to work with the twins, will they care about that. They are remarkably relaxed about their NEWTs. They just might be the calmest people out of both age groups. Then again, they have never been ones to take school seriously. They're brilliant, there is no doubt about that – well there isn't if one actually pays attention to them and not just their jokes – but school has never really been their thing. They have their eyes on bigger things. Bigger and non traditional things.

He has taken to studying with both Longbottom and Nott. Longbottom because yes, while he is freaking out as much as the others, he does so quietly. No frantic pacing or flailing – unlike some he could name. Draco among them. Draco does not worry quietly. Nott because he is not panicking at all. He is calm, cool and collected. Harry can still minorly relax around him. That is something he desperately needs at this point.

As the weeks and months draw closer, Harry can feel himself tense more and more. Soon, if something does not happen, he is either going to snap or fly off the handle. Neither is something that he wants to happen. Messy.

Severus has him drinking a special tea every night before he goes to bed just so he can sleep some. Not a potion because that isn't going to be good for him at this point. But it helps him relax a bit and calm his thoughts down. Sometimes it keeps the nightmares away. Sometimes it isn't enough.

At this point, he is either on the edge of crying or laughing hysterically. He tries not to do either mainly because he isn't sure he will be able to stop once he starts. And if his and Longbottom's potion doesn't start to improve soon, he is going to scream. That he most definitely isn't going to be able to stop if he starts.

Something keeps going wrong with it and neither of them are sure what. It's not as if it is exploding or anything. It is just... useless. Worthless. Not unlike Harry himself, especially now. Both have exactly no purpose except to waste valuable time and resources. One good thing is that his comprehensive notes are done and more useful than he had expected. Longbottom seems especially impressed by it. But that is the only good thing about the whole thing.

At this rate, how is he suppose to survive until the end of the year?
Pressure, just like the tide, ebbs and flows with time. It can build, slowly and surely, or it can come rushing in at once. But always remember, like the tide, it will always retreat eventually again.

It comes to Harry in the middle of the night when he should be sleeping. He had woken up, gasping, from a dream of Dementors chasing him, trying to Kiss him. Because of course he is dreaming of that. It is practically unavoidable at this point. He had been desperately trying to cast a Patronus, but of course he couldn't. He can't, not even in dreams. They had surrounded him.

But then he had dropped his wand, waved a hand and suddenly, as the way dreams go, he wasn't alone. His unicorns were there with him. They pushed him in between them and neighed in challenge at the Dementors. And miraculously the Dementors fled from them. His unicorns protected him.

Thinking on that, he smacks himself on the head and climbs out of bed. Quickly grabbing the books he needs from his pile, he goes out to the common room where he can read in peace. He climbs into one of the window seats that looks into the lake and begins to read. Fortunately he has this book with him. Ironically enough it wasn't for DADA either, but because Regulus had given it to him.

He is still reading when his Housemates begin to wake up and get ready for breakfast. He is practically bouncing in his seat. This could work. This could be the break they have been looking for. The exact thing they need. Well, things technically, but Harry knows that he can get both easily enough. Because, yes, he is obviously a 'creature tamer'. This would be almost impossible without that. Maybe, just this once, he will catch a break.

Lessons are a torture. He can hardly concentrate and it shows. None of his Professors are very impressed with him, although fortunately none give him detention. It's not as if he isn't trying to pay attention. He really is. But he can't help but keep going back to his potion idea, discarding that and revising this. Drafting several tests and combinations they can try to see if it will work.

At the end of classes, Harry flies out of the door and races so that he can get his supplies and meet up with Longbottom right away. First he goes outside, to his usual spot where he meets the – his – unicorns. After all this time, he can't help but think of them as his. He can't help himself. They don't seem to mind though. In fact, they seem to like it quite a bit.

As always, they are waiting for him. It is almost as if they know when he needs them. “Hello,” he greets, slightly out of breath from running, “can I have some of your hair?” he blurts out gracelessly, “If you wouldn't mind that is. You see, I'm trying to make a potion to protect people from Dementors. And people are always saying about how sensitive you are to anything Dark. And how you're supposed to be one of the purist creatures there are. We have been trying to find something powerful enough to battle a Dementor's depression and I think you might be a key to help with that.” He explains all of this quickly, almost tripping over his words.

He is both too excited and too nervous to slow down. He's not sure how much they understand him, but they always respond when he talks to them, so there is no harm in trying. And he wouldn't dare do anything without telling them why in any case. That is both rude and stupid.

They seem to confer with each other before they all approach him. Harry grins and pulls a brush out of his bag. Carefully he combs their manes and tails, gathering all the loose hair they have. When he
is done he seals it all in a bag he took just for this purpose. “Thank you so much,” he says, hugging them all and running off, “I'll let you know how it goes,” he calls over his shoulder. One down, one more to go.

Fortunately he doesn't have to go far either. Fawkes is waiting for him as he passes a row of empty classrooms. “Hello Fawkes,” he says.

Fawkes trills at him.

“Um, listen, do you think that maybe I could have some of your tears? For a research potion,” he quickly explains once again what he is doing and why he thinks he needs phoenix tears to make it work.

Fawkes trills at him again.

Harry pulls out a vital and he cries into it. When it is full, he carefully caps it and puts it into his bag. Elevated, he hugs Fawkes too, with a quick “Thanks, you're the best” before he is running off to Gryffindor Tower to get Longbottom. Today isn't a day that they planned to work together, but Harry doubts he will mind once he learns of Harry's idea. It's the best thing they have to go on so far.

Of course he knows exactly where the Tower is. Between the twins and the Marauders Map how could he not? So he approaches their portrait, the Fat Lady, with only a bit of nervousness about coming this close to the lion's den. “Hello,” he greets.

“Hello Sweetie. What is the password?” she asks, obviously not noticing the color of his tie.

Harry shakes his head. “Wrong House ma'am. I was wondering if you could pass on a message for me? I need to talk to Neville Longbottom – for a school project,” he adds.

“Oh ma'am,” she says. If she was able to blush, she would have, “my aren't you a polite one then. You wait right here then and I'll see what I can do.” She disappears from her frame.

Harry waits, shifting from one foot to another. Before long, she is back and then her portrait opens. Longbottom steps out. “Potter? Oh, I didn't forget to meet up with you did I?” he asks in concern.

Harry shakes his head. “I have an idea,” he says excitedly.

Longbottom's eyes light up. “Wait here, I'll go grab my things then.” He closes the portrait, disappearing from view.

“Thank you very much ma'am,” he says.

“Oh you're very welcome. It's always nice to see such a polite young man, no matter his House.”

Harry is saved from having to respond to that by Longbottom appearing again. “Let's go to the lab then.”

Harry nods and off they go. He doesn't say anything until they are in the room, door closed. Severus isn't there, but seeing as how they aren't going to be brewing right now, that is fine. Quickly he explains the thought he had, trying to fully articulate why he thinks it is a good idea.

“So you think phoenix tears because they are essentially the most powerful healing liquid there is,” Longbottom summarizes, “And unicorn hair because of their purity and their infinity for the Light.”

Harry nods. “So?” he asks, suddenly nervous again. What if this ends up being a stupid idea? He
would hate to waste their time and resources just for this to be a disaster. Just because he thinks it is a
good idea doesn't mean it is. He got his inspiration from a dream for Merlin's sake. That isn't exactly
very confidence inspiring is it? What if-

“ I think it's brilliant,” Longbottom says excitedly, “I can't believe we didn't think of this before.
Potter, you're a genius!”

Harry blushes. Genius? He certainly wouldn't go that far. Still, this is a new place to start.

They pull out their notes and begin to work.

Inspiration, when it strikes, is something akin to being stroke by lightening.

It still takes them another three weeks to produce anything they think might be successful. But unlike
the other long, unsuccessful months before this, these three weeks seem to fly by. They are now
spending all of their time that they can get away with in the potions lab.

Severus had raised an eyebrow when Harry had told him of this latest development, but said nothing.
He took that as a good sign. He may not be allowed to offer advice, but he has a way of steering
them clear of anything too potentially disastrous.

But three weeks later and they have something that can be tested. They bottle it up and go see if
Professor Graham has any advice on how to do so. In fact he does, being an Auror. He promises to
take good care of it and show them the pensieve memory of it when it is done. There is nothing more
they can do but wait.

A nerve wrecking three days later and Professor Graham returns with their results. The potion is a
success – mostly. It does what it needs to do, but it also needs to be stronger. Still, even with it being
as weak as it is, the Department of Law Enforcement was already interested in it.

Harry and Longbottom look at each other in surprise. One thing to hear that they might be. Another
thing to be told that they already are.

It takes two more tests and one more week before they have something that works and works well.
Professor Graham comes back from the test beaming at both of them. Harry can hardly believe it.
They did it. They actually did it.

They actually did it.

“ I want to congratulate the both of you,” Professor Graham says, still beaming at them, “This is no
little thing, making a new potion. And at fifteen years old at that. Mark my word boys, this is going
to make your future right here. You will be hailed as proteges. I can already tell you Head Auror
Scrimgeour has already said that he will be willing to negotiate with you for either brewing rights or
to purchase it from you once you have everything sorted out.”

Harry and Longbottom share another look. What?
“Take some time and think about it. Clean up your notes, write up your report and turn it in. I'd recommend discussing this with Professor Snape. He is our resident Potions Master after all. I am sure he can give you sound advice on the matter.”

“Yes Sir,” both Harry and Longbottom say before leaving the room.

Harry feels as if he is in a daze. They did it. Merlin, he can hardly believe it.

“Well why don't the two of you look like the kneazle that got the canary,”

“And then found out it was still alive afterwards.”

Fred and George come up to them and carelessly throw an arm around either of Harry's shoulders. Longbottom holds up their vital. “We did it!” he tells them, grinning from ear to ear.

“You did?”

“Congratulations then!”

“Our little Lord and his faithful minion,”

“Taking over the world, one potion at a time.”

“We are so proud.”

They pick both of them up and pull them into an overly enthusiastic hug.

Harry can't help but hug them back. A giggle escapes him and he lets it. Merlin, it's done. Over. Complete. No more experimenting. No more frantic reading. All they need to do is some compiling and some editing and they are done. Even better yet, this means they no longer have to do either their potions OWL or their herbology OWL. They've already passed with this! Two more things he no longer has to worry about.

“Time to celebrate.”

“Yes, let us feast and make merry on this joyous occasion.”

Needless to say they do not get any more work done that day. None of them do. Once Luna and Draco hear, they gladly abandon their homework and join in. They gather in one of the unused classrooms and laugh and eat and joke for the rest of the night until curfew.

True to his promise, he tells both Fawkes and his unicorns about their success the next day. Of course none of them can speak, but they all act happy for him. Maybe they are simply picking up his mood, but he doesn't think so.

He also talks to Severus about what to do next.

He sits both of them down and explains, “As of right now, both of you two are the only ones who know how to make this potion. Once everything is in order and sent to the correct people, you will own the rights to it. This means you are the only ones who will be legally allowed to brew it. Should you wish to do so, you can sell brewing rights to either certain people or give it up entirely and allow anyone to brew it.

“Should you decide only a few people may brew it, they will have to pay you for the right to have the recipe. It is still your potion, but they are allowed to use it. Legally only you two and said brewer...
are allowed to make it. Should you give up brewing rights, anyone may use it as they please. That means legally anyone may make it. Understand?”

Both of them nod.

“Now when choosing what to do, it depends a great deal on what you wish done with it. Do you wish to make money on it? Do you wish to spread the knowledge of it? Do you wish to brew it anymore now that you have perfected it? All of these questions factor into your decision.

“Understand that even if you give up brewing rights, you will not be giving up the fame of it. It will still be known as your potion. The two of you are the creators of it. No one can take that away from you. And rest assured that there will be quite a bit of fame coming from this. Making a potion is no small feat. It is one of the requirements of completing a Mastery in potions. And seeing as you both know how many – or how few rather – Potion Masters there are out there comparatively to other professions, you may assume how difficult this feat is.

“Do not rush into this decision. If you wish to keep the brewing rights for now, you may always change that later. But once you sell them, there is no getting it back. Yes?”

Both of them nod again.

“Another thing to keep in mind specifically is the availability of your ingredients. Both phoenix tears and unicorn hair are rare – and expensive – ingredients. They are not easy to obtain if your last name is not Potter.” Severus looks at him pointedly.

Harry blushes at his teasing. Yes he knows he has an odd following of creatures. True to his prediction, Regulus enjoys joking about it. He seems delighted in it and Harry can see how he is related to his godfather now. Both of them joke the same way when they let themselves.

“Indeed. This would factor into the price of brewing rights and how useful it will be to others who may not be able to afford these ingredients. Should you brew it yourselves then it's availability would increase rather than be limited by other factors. The fact that the Ministry is interested means that you may set the price how you wish and distribute it to them without a third party complicating matters more. Otherwise whoever you allow to brew it will have to find their own source for rare ingredients. Are you still following?”

“Yes Sir,” Harry reassures him.

“Very good. Now Potter, this is also something for you personally to consider. I am aware of a certain amount of research you put into this – mainly your comprehensive study of all potion ingredients and how they interact with each other. This is a valuable resource as you have no doubt realized. Nor is there another resource out there that is quite as detailed and user friendly. If you so wished so, you could turn this into a text book for the masses to use.

“And Mr Longbottom, should you have contributed, or have your own similar version for herbology then I offer you the same advice. Books such as this are not written very often. Both of them are sure to be rather popular and useful to the dunderheads that cannot tell dragon's blood from a bat's wing.” He scowls.

Harry snorts at that, wholly amused. It is just so very Severus that he simply cannot help it. It also distracts him from the shock of his suggestion. A book? Severus thinks that, on top of everything, he would be able to publish a book as well? This just keeps getting bigger and bigger.

It grows even more when their potion is submitted to the Potions Guild for their approval. Word gets
out and not only do they have the professionals excited, they have the public following along as well. They make the front page of the Daily Prophet for three days running. There are numerous requests for them – everything from interviews to questions to straight up fan mail.

It is overwhelming to say the least. Never has he ever received this much positive attention before. It is downright unnerving. He doesn't know what to do with it all. People as a rule don't like him. They don't praise him. They don't think he is worth the time or the effort or anything. He is used to being the Freak. Now... now he isn't. Now they are finally saying he is worth something. He doesn't know what to do with that.

Add to everything that while they have completed two classes, they still have their other classes and OWLs to prepare for. It is enough to make Harry wish he could clone himself to be able to get everything done. There is still a month left before they take their OWLs and they need all the extra time they can get.

Talking it over, both Harry and Longbottom – now Neville because he finally asked after all this time to be on first name basis with him – agree to brew the potion for now. It makes more sense because Severus is right. Both phoenix tears and unicorn hair are rare if you can't get them as easily as Harry can. And they want their potion to be able to be useful. Harry also tentatively mentions that he would like to give brewing rights to Severus, as a thank you for all he has done for Harry.

Neville smiles at that, but doesn't say anything beyond agreeing that it is fine with him.

They also make the decision to publish their notes into books. Harry's is all but finished, with only some finishing touches needed, but Neville's needs more work. His wasn't as originally as detailed as Harry's. But Harry is fine with waiting. More than fine, what with how busy they are right now. So they decide to publish them as companion books over the summer.

Thus they are kept busy right up until testing begins. All of them are. The tension in the school rises as the days grow closer. People become more irritable. More prone to hysterics and emotional outbursts. Tempers become frayed and patience runs thin. It is a nightmare in and of itself without Harry's actual nightmares adding to it all.

The only calm people in the entire school seem to be the twins and Luna. Well, and Nott as well, but seeing as he is always calm that is no real surprise there. Everyone else is running around in a panic. The three of them take it upon themselves to make sure that the other three do not lose their heads – or their sanity – before the school year is done. Although Harry thinks it might be too late for his sanity. Far too late. Years in fact.

Still the dreaded week arrives whether they are ready for it or not. And Harry most certainly does not feel ready. Sick? Yes. Panicked as bloody hell? Most definitely. Prepared in the slightest? Not at all. All the hours of studying and reading seem like a poor effort now that it is here.

No matter though. Time to finish this once and for all.

Harry is exhausted by the end of it. He feels like a puddle of goo. Automatically his feet carry him to Regulus and Severus' quarters where he climbs into the bed he claimed last term as his and falls straight asleep. He stays that way for ten hours before he wakes up again, if not fully rested then at least feeling human again.

And with that, the school year is done. Now all that is left to do is wait for his results. And finish up his book for publication. Too bad that isn't the end of everything. Not quite yet anyways.
Likewise, fame can have a similar affect. Both are rather stunning when you are not expecting it.

“Harry my boy, thank you for coming to see me.” Dumbledore smiles kindly at him. “Lemon drop?”

Harry shakes his head. Thank you for coming? Right, as if he really had a choice in the matter. When one receives a summons from the Headmaster, it is not a suggestion to consider but a command to obey. And why does he insist on 'my boy'? Harry is no one's boy. And even if he is, he certainly isn't the Headmaster's, that's for certain.

“Suit yourself then. Have a seat, make yourself comfortable.”

Harry obeys.

“Good then. My you have had a busy school year, have you not?” Dumbledore's eyes twinkle at him as he speaks. It makes Harry terribly uneasy. “Congratulations are certainly in order. I am sure that you are tired of hearing this my now, but it really is quite a remarkable thing. Why, you might even end up giving Severus a run for his money hmm?”

Harry smiles at that, but it feels fake to him. Stretched too thin over unwilling lips. “Thank you Sir,” he says, hoping that they can move on now.

“I am sure you are wondering why I asked you here. Rest assured that you are not in any trouble. I simply wished to know where you plan to stay for your summer. Of course you really should be returned to your relatives. I understand why that was not possible last year, but now it should be.”

Harry can feel himself go pale at that. Suddenly he feels very lightheaded. As if the world has picked up speed around him. If Dumbledore notices this, he gives no sign, continuing on.

“However I am aware that you have had another offer for new legal guardians. Or even adoption as I have heard. Yes, I am sure that both Severus and Regulus would be glad to have such a bright boy. But I wanted to make sure that you are aware of all of your options before you come to a decision.”

That sounds ominous. It does nothing to settle his nerves, only make them worse. “Sir?” he asks.

But before he can get an answer, Dumbledore's fireplace flares and out walks Black. “Hello Albus,” he greets happily, “you wanted to see me?”

Harry's stomach drops. This is not good. In fact, this is a disaster in the making right here. Bad, so very very bad. His breath catches in his throat. He barely notices Lupin arrive behind him.

“Yes indeed my boy. I was just beginning to tell Harry about this, so your timing is excellent.”

Black turns and beams at him. “Harry! Hi pup, how are you doing? Survived the tests alright? Merlin I hated those things.” He comes over and pulls Harry into a hug. Harry is too frozen to respond, but Black doesn't seem to mind if he even notices at all.

Lupin smiles at him but does not approach. He takes a seat in the last available chair away from Harry, leaving room for Black to sit next to him. Which is exactly what he does. He takes the chair
next to him, grinning happily.

“Now as I was saying,” Dumbledore continues, “I wanted to make sure that you knew all of the options available to you before you made any decisions.” The twinkling increases.

Harry wants to yell at him to be quiet. To stop talking. To not even suggest it where Black can hear it. Because once he does, it will make everything all the worse. But he doesn't say anything. He can't. His voice is stuck in his throat with no way to escape in time.

“As you know, Sirius is your godfather. He was the person your parents chose to raise you should anything happen to them. Of course things being as they were, he was not able to,” he says, as if twelve years in Azkaban was nothing more than a simple annoyance, “But now he is able to. If you should desire, you could live with Sirius. He could even legally become your guardian. Or your parent,” he adds the last as if it is a wonderful gift he is giving Harry.

It isn't. Not at all. It is the opposite in fact.

He hears Black's breath catch beside him. “Really, I could?” he asks, voice growing excited, “I am finally cleared?”

“Indeed my boy, you are. Legally you now have every right to Harry as any other godparent.”

As if he is a thing to be handed over or a toy to be given away. Nails bite into skin as he tries to control himself. He is going to remain calm. He is going to be reasonable and collected about this. He is not going to act like a baby or fly into a panic attack. Then none of them will listen to him.

Black turns to him. “What do you say pup? Would you like to be mine? Officially that is?”

The hope in Black's face is painful to witness. To know that he wants this so badly. To know Harry does not want this just as much. What is even worse is that he doubts he will end up having a choice in the matter. It has already been decided. Before Black and Lupin even entered the room, it had been decided. Dumbledore will do what he thinks is best, as always, whether Harry agrees with him or not. Isn't that how it always goes.

Harry's breath hitches, catching in his throat.

Black seems oblivious to this, waiting for his answer, but Lupin isn't. He frowns. “Harry, are you alright?” he asks in concern.

Harry doesn't say anything. All he can do is stare at Black and keep breathing. Breathe and wait for his fate to once again be decided by another. When has what Harry wanted ever mattered? Never because it doesn't matter. He doesn't matter. He never has. He likely never will. Certainly not if he is given to Black.

At first he doesn't even realize that he is shaking until he looks down at his hands and sees for himself. Blood drips from his fingernails where they have broken skin on his palm. Calm. Stay calm. *Stay calm*. But it is no use. His breath picks up again, stuttering as it comes out.

“Harry?” Black asks, finally realizing that something isn't right here, “Pup? You don't look so good all of a sudden. Are you feeling alright?”

He can't move. He can hardly breathe. No he isn't feeling alright, what a stupid question. See, Severus was right. There is such a thing as a stupid question.

Almost as if his thought had summoned him, Severus walks in the door, Regulus close behind in.
“Headmaster,” he greets coolly, “I see you have started without us. Might I remind you that I am required to be here when you summon my students for important matters?”

“Come now my boy, this is a friendly family meeting, no need to be so defensive here.”

“Friendly yes,” Severus says, dry as a desert, “Is that why Potter looks as if he is a ghost.”

“Yes it does appear as if he has had a shock. I admit that I did not think my news would affect him this much.”

“And what news might that be?” Oh Severus sounds dangerous now. His voice is practically a purr. Any of his students know that is when he is about to attack. Unfortunately for him, the Headmaster does not seem to know this – or he doesn't care – for he carries on cheerfully. “Why the fact that Sirius, as the boy's legal godfather, is able to adopt him as well. Perhaps even easier than the two of you.

There is a low noise at that. Harry doesn't realize that it is him that is making it. He is too busy trying to breathe instead.

“I beg your pardon?” Regulus asks, “are you implying that, for some reason, Harry is not suppose to be with us? That Sirius is the better choice although we both know Harry better.”

There is a warm presence at his back. Harry leans into it. He barely registers the black robe in his hand as he grabs onto it.

“I am just saying that I believe Harry should have a chance to be with his real family is all. The one that Lily and James chose for their son.”

“You mean like Petunia,” Severus spits the name, “is his real family? Because I can assure you that is no recommendation on either of their parts.”

“And you think you could do a better job Snivellus? Just what are you doing to him now?”

Black touches his arm and Harry flinches violently away. No, no, no. No touching. It isn't safe. It's never safe. It only means more pain. He leans into Severus more, desperately trying to hide.

“Yes, clearly you are an excellent choice Mutt. Fine job right there.”

“Harry is my godson, I would never hurt him. It's because of you that he is like this. I bet you filled his head with all kinds of stories. Trying to turn him against me.”

“Oh no, you are doing a fine job of that yourself. There is no need for me to say a word.”

Harry burrows further in the robes. He doesn't want to be here anymore. He wants to be gone. Away. He wants this conversation to have never have happened. Too bad he never gets what he wishes for.

“Just what are you playing at here Headmaster?” Regulus asks angrily.

“I am not playing at anything. I want the best for Harry here, the same as all of us here. It wouldn't be fair to keep information from him, would it?”

“Of course not,” Regulus snorts in disgust, “Especially when it is to your advantage.”

“Give me my godson Snivellus,” Black says angrily, “He is mine, not yours.”
“One might argue that because he is a Slytherin, he is in fact mine. However, seeing as how he is a human and not a chew toy, I will not stand here and fight over him like one.”

“So he's a Slytherin? So what? His parents were Gryffindors, he can't be all bad.”

“You mean he can't be all evil,” Regulus says, just as dry as Severus ever is.

Harry flinches as his breath once again picks up. It is true isn't it? That is what Black means. It is always what Black means.

“Shall we do an arm count to see how many of my classmates were Marked compared to yours?” Black bites back.

Harry loses the thread of conversation after that. Everything is a blur, especially when the yelling begins. When he comes back to himself, he is curled up in Severus' lap, inside his robes. He makes a faint noise.

“Back with us brat?” Severus asks.

“Brat?” Black hisses. There is a thud and then, “Ow, Remmy,” he complains.

Harry plasters himself against his side, getting as close as possible.

“I will take that as a yes. Are you going to come out now?”

Harry shakes his head. No. No he isn't. He isn't coming out until it is safe. And it isn't safe yet. There are too many dangerous people around still. Too many unknown factors. Better to stay here where he knows he has some form of protection.

“Brat,” Severus mutters again.

“Quit calling my godson a brat Snivellus,” Black says, a growl clear in his voice.

“His brat,” Harry mutters back to him. It isn't very effective considering he said it into Severus' chest, but still. The point remains the same. He is Severus' brat.

“What was that pup?” he asks, all concerned.

Harry turns so that he can be heard this time. “His brat. Means I'm tolerable,” he says, echoing Severus from all those months ago.

“Tolerable?” Black sounds outraged at this.

Regulus sighs. “Your tolerable and Severus' tolerable mean two completely different things, believe me. And haven't you been listening to your Mind Healer at all lately? Or has all your sense flown out the window? Again.”

Black grumbles something under his breath but doesn't answer.

“If you are done pushing my students into panic attacks then Headmaster,” Severus says.

“Do you not believe this is a sign that Harry needs help? A good support system?”

“Which we are fully capable of providing. Or did you miss which of us he clung to when he was vulnerable?”
Harry flinches at the word, hating how weak it makes him sound. How weak he is.


“Panic attacks are not a sign of failure. They are a body's way of reacting to undue amounts of stress. It does not mean you are weak for having them,” he says dutifully.

“Very good. Now is that all?”

“There is still the matter of Harry's legal guardians,” Dumbledore says gently.

Severus growls, “You are really pushing your luck today, aren't you, you manipulative old bastard?”

“Now come now my boy-”

“I am not your boy,” Severus says angrily.

“These things need to be taken care of sooner rather than later. You know how it is.”

“I'll do it,” Harry says.

“What was that?” Regulus asks.

Harry partly comes out of the safety of Severus' robes. “I accept your adoption. I choose the two of you,” he says firmly. Now is not the time for doubts. Now is the time for action. “I choose you,” he repeats.

“Are you sure?” Regulus asks, “We may be forced into this,” and here he glares at the Headmaster, “but we can become your legal guardians instead.”

He shakes his head.

“Adoption cannot be undone. We can do the paperwork for the guardianship now and the adoption later, if you want it still.”

“No, adoption,” he insists.

“And why is that?”

“Legal guardians can be undone. If we do that, you can be taken away. I don't want to lose you.”

“And who would take us away?”

He points at the Headmaster. “Him. He keeps trying to control me and he might change his mind and take you away from me. But if you adopt me, he can't. He can't undo it. You'll be my parents. Mine.”

His parents. The thought both thrills him and makes him sick to his stomach. But out of the three choices he has, it is no choice at all. The Dursleys certainly aren't an option. And he has too many issues with Black to agree to be his son, the least being he does not trust him at all.

He may not trust Severus and Regulus fully, but it is more than most people. He isn't even sure if, at this point, he will ever be able to trust anyone completely. He has been burned too many times before. Still, it is the best choice he has. And he can't say he isn't happy with it. He is. He may have issues with it, but he has issues with everything. That's just the way he is.

And so it is decided.
Beware the person who says they are doing this for your own good. They likely have no idea what they are talking about.

And that is how Harry James Potter became Lord Heir Harry James Regulus Potter-Black-Snape. It is a mouthful, but traditional. Or that's what he's told when he complains about it. The best part about the ceremony is the extra height he gained from the blood adoption potion. Finally he isn't the shortest in his year anymore.

The school is shocked when the announcement is made. So is the rest of their world. But Harry doesn't care. He refuses to care when they treat his life like the newest show on the telly. This is his life, he will live it the way he wants to. And if he still has doubts about this, well, it is still better than the Dursleys or Black. Everything else can be dealt with later. He has the time now after all.

The twins graduate with a bang of course. None of the Professors are very impressed, the Headmaster least of all. Harry appreciates the gesture though. None of his friends are happy with the way he handled the adoption. They promise to show him their new shop once they buy it. They already have the building picked out. Their job offers still stands firm, even with all the attention he is getting over his potion. Especially with all the attention he is getting.

Neville is almost ready with the final draft of his book. They want to publish it before the next school year begins. Maybe some of the students will find it useful. The they are going to work out a schedule and way to brew their Dementor Protection Potion. Not a very original name, but then it doesn't have to be. It just needs to say what it does.

Luna is going with her Father to Sweden to look for the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. He wishes her luck. She promises to bring one back for him.

Draco is yet again spending the summer with them. Narcissa is still in France. It is doubtful she will ever come back at this point. He finds himself happier than expected at this. As it turns out, the prat is growing on him after all. A bit like fungus actually. Maybe... maybe something is possible between them after all. Only time will tell at this point.

And Harry, well.

“Come on brat, let's go home.”

Harry is beginning to think that his hope might not be such a bad thing after all.

Always remember, and never forget, it is always darkest before the dawn.
Fanmix

Chapter Summary

Just my playlist for this fic, plus a couple of covers cause why not? I was procrastinating...

Story Cover:

![Image](image_url)

Never Enough
('Cause the World Won't Understand)

a Harry Potter fanfiction by InTheShadows

Fanmix Cover:
1. **Gotta Be Somebody** by Nickelback
2. **Welcome to My Life** by Simple Plan
3. **Forest Fires** by Lauren Aquilina
4. **The Real Me** by Andrew Stein
5. **Monster** by Skillet
6. **Going Under** by Evanescence
7. **I Will Be** by Stanfour
8. **Crash and Burn** by Savage Garden
9. **Runinn'** by Adam Lambert
10. **Bring Me to Life** by Evanescence
11. **In The End** by Linkin Park
12. **Get Out Alive** by Three Days Grace
13. **Everything Changes** by Staind
14. **Name** by Goo Goo Dolls
15. **Lean on/Lean On Me** by Sam Tsui & Casey Breves
16. **Iris** by Goo Goo Dolls
17. **Underneath** by Adam Lambert
18. **Stand In The Rain** by Superchick
19. **Shake It Out** by Florence + the Machine

Bonus Tracks:
1. **Dream On** by Aerosmith
2. **Don't Stop Believin'** by Journey
3. **Tragedy + Time** by Rise Against
4. **Prayer Of The Refugee** by Rise Against
5. **Crossroads** by I Prevail

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