The Meaning of Geranium

by Endrina

Summary

With adulthood comes the realization that parents can’t fix all. That there are dangers that are too big. This is the story of a war and the people who didn't want to fight in it but did anyway.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
It was ridiculous. It was raining a lot, Harry’s hands were cold, and the place Sirius wanted to take
them didn’t look like it was particularly well insulated.

When he said he had a better option, Draco jumped at it. Now that Harry was in the company of two
adult wizards he could practice magic freely. He only had to find a place with no muggles and he
could conjure up a house, just as he had been doing on his trip here.

There was an empty plot in a side street, in between two buildings with no windows looking to the
empty space. No one was out in that rain, it was perfect.

It was, however, extremely awkward. They were looking at him.

It was so awkward that he danced through the whole full song and didn’t get anything to happen. He
tried to do it with his eyes closed and start with his back turned to them, so he wouldn’t feel
embarrassed, but he still failed.

Sirius looked as if he were quite entertained nevertheless. He grinned and gave Harry two thumbs
up. From time to time he shook himself like a dog to get the worst of the rain out of his hair.

This time, Harry asked them to please turn around, which they did with just a little bit of grumbling
because someone didn’t want to leave Harry out of his sight. They absolutely balked at the idea of
walking to the ends of the short street to see if anyone was coming, so turning around was it.

But it worked. There was a house. He even got two bedrooms.

“So, did you all hear a song?” asked Sirius, back still turned. “Because I heard a song. At first he
was singing by himself, but by the end I heard other voices and instruments.”

“It’s the earphones.” Draco pointed to his own ears. “They don’t always work with him and the
music falls out, happens all the time.”
“Oh, I see.”

They turned around.

“The house is new, though” pointed Draco, expert commentator on current Harry behaviour.

“I find the lack of yellow underwhelming” said Sirius.

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“So, how are you getting food?” asked Remus. They four of them were now sitting at a table in the house. All coats and wet shoes had been left in a corner.

Harry shrugged. “It comes with the house”.

“That’s… not… possible” Draco said slowly. You never knew with Harry.

“Why not?”

“Why not?” exclaimed Sirius the Charms nerd. “What have you been doing in Hogwarts? It’s the very first exception to Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration. You can’t conjure food out of thin air.”

THUMP!

Oinnnnnggg.

Thplip.

The toaster chose that moment to violently expel two slices of toast with such force that one of them flew out of the crib and fell in to the kitchen counter.

“I didn’t know that” said Harry. “To be honest, I did not pay any attention in class.”

“I can confirm that” Draco peeped.

“So this is what you have been eating?” asked Remus who was now examining the kitchen and opening a few cabinets. With his height he did not have to stand on tiptoe to see the contents of the highest shelves. “Toast and cheese and other snacks?” He had a tone. Not a tone of wonder, precisely, at Harry’s dismissal of Gum’s First Explanation or whatever it was. It was the parental tone that children around the world know it means is time to come up with some good excuses and some adamant denial.

“Pretty much, yes.”

“And what about vegetables, young man?”

Ooh, someone was in trouble, Remus had a hand on his hip. “Have you eaten any fruit at all?”

Harry argued that he did not actually choose what kind of food appeared and that at some point there had been a stew with peppers in it, which totally counted as vegetables. None of this served him as an excuse and Remus lectured him on the importance of vitamins and eating fruit and green vegetables and of course honey didn’t count as one even if it came from flowers.

By the end of the lecture the house produced some spinach and a bunch of bananas out of embarrassment. Everyone, including Sirius, went hurriedly to eat one under Remus’ vigilant eye.
The rain and wind picked up as the evening blended in to the night. There is nothing quite like listening to heavy rain while you are inside a house. If you can touch something made of wood at the same time (a table or the floor, anything), the place instantly become ten times better.

Harry noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that Draco’s shoulders started to go down from his ears, and Sirius’ face changed softly as if he only now were allowing himself to feel tired.

The house, the biggest Harry had been able to conjure so far, had two bedrooms in addition to the open kitchen and living room and bathroom. Perhaps someone would expect them to have the grown-ups in a room and Draco and him in another, but although Harry liked Draco, he was just Draco the snotty schoolmate. Across was his Dad, whom Harry had missed madly for the last five years.

Harry would say that his sleep had improved considerably from that horrible first year of school. However, that night was the first night he really slept. Harry fell asleep snuggled in Remus’ arms, feeling safe and warm and loved, like he had felt (and barely remembered) after watching Sleeping Beauty for the first time.

He slept and he felt rested.

However.

In his quest to get his childhood back Harry had grown. He would not get back those missing years and all those hugs he didn’t receive. He was happy now and for the whole duration of that evening and night his mind and body told him that he could relax, that it was good, that all would be well.

But Harry had grown. With adulthood comes the realization that parents can’t fix all. That there are dangers that are too big.

Harry had grown and he had faced more challenges than most.

Before falling asleep, he talked and talked to Remus, tried to tell him about everything that had happened. And without meaning to, he found himself editing things. This is what you do when you return after a long absence. You don’t speak of certain things because you know they bring pain.

Remus noticed, because some days Remus almost seemed clairvoyant.

(He wasn’t, he just knew Harry very well).

He let Harry talk and when he was done, he very carefully asked the questions and Harry spoke. Dumbledore and Harry’s feelings of disconnection on the face of his obvious kindness and Harry’s guilt over it. The Dursleys, oh the Dursleys every bloody year. Umbridge and her torture. (This one was hard, because Harry knew Severus couldn’t do anything about it so he had to keep it hidden from him to avoid hurting him). Harry told him all of that, incapable of looking at him in the eye and taking refuge in Remus’ arms. There is something about being hurt that makes you feel ashamed when you should be proud that you survived.

There was something he didn’t speak of. Something Harry couldn’t utter and make into words.

There was a new scar in his chest. Angry purple lines that were slowly turning to pink and silver. Harry felt like something had been removed from him when he got that scar and he was afraid. Afraid that he couldn’t die and that every encounter with Voldemort, with death, would take a little bit of him until he became a monster like Voldemort himself. Really, how can you give voice to a
thought like that?

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The house started to waver and collapse an hour after breakfast the next day. Harry managed to keep it up, but the moment he stepped outside the whole thing disappeared leaving behind a small cloud of dust.

“We need something a bit more permanent” pointed Sirius sagely. He was grinning. The man seemed unable to be inconvenienced by any obstacles.

Sirius and Remus, the adult supervision in charge, had an incredibly long and boring conversation over where to go next. Harry tuned out after just a minute, which was the time it took Sirius to go from Cool Uncle to Adult Neurotically Worried About Safety. (It was Remus’ default mode, in Sirius it was more of a surprise). Harry didn’t know exactly where had they been hiding all this time after their escape, but apparently they both agreed emphatically it was not an adequate place for young adults or long stays.

Draco had an equally bored and disengaged expression, like he would gladly accept living under a bridge if only they would shut up right now.

“How is Hogwarts?” asked Harry. What a careful question that was. No why are you here or what happened.

Draco explained. The riots and Umbridge and all the things they conquered and how they fought. Everything, except for why exactly he had left.

“So, did you just walk out the main gate?” Harry was confused and a bit angry with himself. “Because I think I tried that my first year and it was locked.”

Main door of the castle: not locked. Door to the land outside: probably locked. Draco didn’t know because he just started to walk blindly through the forest. Harry was fascinated by his description of Mircilius.

Harry and Draco had been enemies, and then reluctant allies, and then silent friends. Today they started to become… Brothers, perhaps, or maybe something else.

“… a poltergeist is hardly a dark lord” Sirius was saying. “And it would keep deatheaters away.”

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The Second Most Haunted House in the United Kingdom. That’s where they agreed to go. Unlike The Shrieking Shack, (Britain’s Most Haunted House), this one seemed to actually have some spirits living in there. Sirius reasoned that it provided perfect cover and Remus, somehow, agreed with him.

The house was just a day of travel away, a morning if they took the train. Between Birmingham and Northampton.

It was missing half of the roof and the garden was infested with gnomes (“They came here before us, I don’t think we should say infested” Remus argued). The house itself, however, was free of doxies, boggarts and other pests. Probably because of the very real malevolent spirit living there whose presence could be felt as soon as they crossed the garden fence.

“Cooooee” said Sirius shoving his head through an open window. The window pane swung close and almost slammed him in the face, if it weren’t for Remus’ quick arm.
Harry and Draco stood aside and watched the old Marauders work their magic as they entered the house and charmed the resident spirit. Not actual charm as in spell but their irresistible and delightful allure that bewitched more than one professor into forgiving their transgressions.

“James was a natural at this” Sirius told them later while they examined the rooms. Other than the second floor and its open roof, the rest seemed to be in quite a decent state. “He was the one to first befriend and name Mircilius.”

Draco glanced aside at Harry, The Boy Who Petted A Dragon. “You don’t say.”

And just like that, they moved in.

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The moon came just a few days after their arrival to the house. That was the main reason why Sirius and Remus had agreed so quickly to the Haunted House. There was enough terrain for the wolf to run and Sirius would make sure he didn’t hurt anything bigger than a rabbit.

It was a very emotional evening. First Remus went into a weird mood in which he lectured them tirelessly on safety measures and demanded that they barricaded the door with the console once he and Sirius left the house. Then Harry became all anguished because Remus obviously wasn’t taking the Wolfsbane nor had he for the last few years. The potion took days to brew and had to be taken for a week so of course he couldn’t be taking it, and black market potions were dangerous. But still Harry got incredibly upset.

And that’s when Draco realized.

“That… bastard!” he said.

Draco had excellent manners. Probably the only positive trait he had gotten from his parents. Everybody went silent and turned around to look at him at this expletive.

“That two-faced liar!” Draco was… Well he was astonished. He had to sit down. “He… He was helping you! Father said he was a deatheater too and that I was to trust him. But he was helping you!”

“What are you talking about?” asked Harry and Sirius at the same time.

“Draco, are you all right?” Remus was smiling faintly. He liked Draco’s explosions of emotion. He liked them a lot. The kid was so tightly wound.

“Oh, don’t you all right me. Don’t you dare!” Draco exclaimed dragging his syllables. “You knoooow what I’m talking about.”

Severus freaking Snape. Professor of Potions. Head of House. Deatheater. But apparently not so much the last one, not the bootlicker for Dumbledore either.

Draco had been raised in the belief that Dumbledore and the Ministry were fools and easy to deceive. Lying to the Dark Lord was a harder feat. Keeping a secret from a Malfoy was a foolish and ultimately hopeless act.

Gosh, he felt so proud of Slytherin right now. Best Head of House ever.

The moon was still coming. They didn’t attempt to deny it because it was so clear now. Who else had the knowledge and means to brew the potion for so many years? Who else could do that and
cover his traces so well that the Ministry wouldn’t suspect a thing? Exactly.

Sirius and Remus left, both of them chuckling at Draco’s wit and indignation at Snape’s deception. Sirius hadn’t figured it out.

He and Harry cleaned the after dinner dishes. They were going to spend the night together in the cellar, kind of a like a sleepover in a way. They had brought the bedding down and the only door to the stairs could be easily barred.

Remus was not running any risks. Even if he could shake Sirius away and made his way back to the house, he would never get to the boys. Never.

They went down calmly, as if it were a habitual thing and nothing out of the ordinary. And they talked. Perhaps this was the first time they were just by themselves, so it was quite fortunate, really, that Draco had had his realization then because they had a wonderful topic to chat about. Draco couldn’t believe the enormous prank Snape was pulling on everyone. Harry referred to him as Severus, for Merlin’s sake.

And Harry was also quite shocked to discovered that Severus had been giving Draco treats and support since his third year. Not that... Draco didn’t speak of it, but not that anything had been as bad as the summer before his third year. Draco had learned very well how to act so that it wouldn’t happen again. But nevertheless Snape had always been there to provide the right excuses. Ridiculously long extra credit assignments with lots of busy work that would keep Draco occupied and out of his father’s sight during holiday breaks. (He didn’t even have to complete them, just say that he was doing so.) Advanced Potions projects that let him come to the classroom and brew something and be alone with his thoughts for a while. The occasional chocolate wand...

Draco wondered if there had been more and he didn’t see it. Now that he thought about it, Snape had been awfully unhelpful with Umbridge.

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Remus always needed his sleep after a transformation, doubly so when he had no potion. Sirius decided to take the boys out and let Remus sleep the morning away. They needed to buy some groceries anyway, Harry’s ability to produce food was limited.

What wasn’t required was for Sirius to drop an arm over each of the boy’s shoulders and say “All right, lads, time someone gives you a proper education.”

He ignored the shared look of embarrassment (and secret delight, because neither of them had known such a Cool Uncle) and started a two hours long monologue on fashion. At least forty-five minutes were dedicated to socks. To Harry’s horror not only Sirius had strong and varied opinions about socks, but so did Draco.

Harry’s socks were brown (left) and pink (right). He kept putting his hands on his pockets and pushing down so the hem would cover his ankles because the passion in the argument told him he may not make it back to the house alive.

The aura of sophistication, however, cracked irreparably once they were at the shops and Harry realized that neither of them had the faintest idea of how to cook. Sirius actually thought that a package of flour per meal was an adequate proportion. Draco stared at the pasta and did not say anything but Harry was pretty sure he had always thought it was sold in soft form.

He took charge of the shopping, careful to include enough fruit and vegetables to keep Remus
happy. On the way back Sirius told them stories of his family, of all the magical families, and of Hogwarts.

Sirius had moved with Harry’s father when he was sixteen. Harry thought he may had known that, but Remus hardly spoke of Sirius back then.

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Remus woke past noon and walked into a warm kitchen full of food and giggling teenagers. Harry hugged him and passed him a freshly made cup of chamomile tea.

“Sirius was telling us about the year with Professor Norrington.”

“Whatever he says, he is exaggerating” Remus said smoothly as he claimed a chair for himself. “Except for the bit about McGonagall.”

This elicited a new round of shrieks and guffaws. Draco put both hands over his mouth and went red. Remus felt a pang of pain at seeing him instinctively cover his laughter.

“Perhaps Sirius has forgotten that he too was affected by the *confundus* casted in DADA class” Remus added after taking a sip of his drink. Sirius said something to the effect that Remus was the one with faulty memory and wasn’t he tired anyway, shut up Moony.

Remus ignored him and turned to the boys. The smile on Harry’s face was perfectly wicked and all of James. Draco was still covering his mouth, his eyes wide open in delighted horror.

“So rather than asking out Agustina Pinkertin to the ball…” Remus explained.

“Oh my god.”

“I can’t hear this. It is too much.”

“… He got side tracked and somehow made his invitation to professor McGonagall.”

The boys laughed so hard Harry stopped breathing for a few seconds. Draco had tears in his eyes.

“Is this all necessary, Moony?”

“I haven’t even told them yet that it happened at lunch in the Great Hall.”

Remus was a good story teller. Better after so many years listening to Severus’ masterful accounts. He knew just when to pause to let the audience laugh before continuing the story.

“She was quite gentle in her rejection, I believe. What where her words exactly?”

“Black, I am afraid you are the fourth gentleman to make such an offer today” Sirius sighted, reminiscing. “I offered to fight them, too. Said I would lay their wands at her feet. I put Avery Jr. in a headlock.”

More than fifteen years and the presence of Gilderoy Lockhart were necessary before Hogwarts saw any kind of romantic festivity again. All because of a clumsy DADA teacher, some misdirected *confundus* spells, and Minerva McGonagall receiving over twelve invitations that year from the student body. Dumbledore received none but Flitwick had three, all from Slytherin students.

“Minerva was a stunner” added Sirius and after both Harry and Draco raised their brows he went on. “Not when we were there, she had already aged then. But at some point she was absolutely
gorgeous.”

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It was hard, supposedly. It was cold and wet and Draco didn’t know very well how exactly they were getting money, only that he had been told not to worry. The spirit had accepted them but still there were days when doors slammed and books flew and you would find all the chairs stuck to the ceiling. Or you would be in bed about to fall asleep and you would feel a rustle and something cold and wet touching the back of your neck.

(In that last case, Sirius said you could come to his room and he would transform into a dog and then you could sleep there. Even if the spirit tried it again, the dog would growl and send it away and you could fall asleep warm and safe and with your face buried in the black fur).

They invented a game called “Harry or Ghost?” The game consisted on noticing that a particular piece of furniture had moved, or something had changed colour, and then wondering whether it was due to Harry or the resident Ghost. You didn’t win anything for guessing right, but occasionally the poltergeist could be heard laughing.

And Draco. Draco had had no idea, all right? No idea. He wondered if this was how the Weasley Clan lived. It probably was and it explained why they didn’t seem to mind very much their pauper state. It was a life of ugly decor and old clothes and a bit of hard bread and laughter, so much laughter.

Like walking into a room to discover the renowned and feared werewolf Remus Lupin standing on a chair and carefully putting Sirius’ toiletries on top of the ceiling lamp because the game “Harry or Ghost?” accepted secret third players. Draco’s silent complicity was bought with a chocolate bar.

Like running around the garden throwing a ball with Harry and a transformed Sirius. Sirius cheated. He would tackle you to the ground or feint at your ankles so he could get the ball.

Like walking with Harry through the garden and to the meadow and forest beside, the grass knee-high at some points. Harry who hadn’t questioned his presence at all and who was carrying a plastic bag and had given Draco another so they could gather some magical plants.

Draco outgrew his clothes, and the ones they managed to find him were second hand and ugly and of course he realized the irony, but he couldn’t dedicate it much time because never in his life had he been so close to happiness.

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Harry slept well. Soundly and completely dead to the world, often with an arm hanging out of the bed. Remus liked checking on the boys in the mornings, still two or three hours before they began to stir. There is no sleep as long and deep as that of a teenager. A child will sleep well, but the teenager is something else. More often than not Remus found that Harry had conjured something in his sleep. The sheets or the windows were another colour and a couple of times he found three butterflies of coloured smoke circling the bed. They vanished as soon as Harry woke up.

It turned out that Draco, while naturally fair skinned, was not supposed to have that unhealthy pallor. The red marks faded away and they took with them the shadows under his eyes. He ate everything they put before him with gusto and, what’s more important, he kept it down.

( Draco hadn’t gone hungry a day in his life. But there had been a time, or the last three years really, when his stomach revelled and he could barely hold anything down and he told himself it was nerves about Quidditch and the stress of the exams. Severus was brewing him something that helped).
It was quite a thing, this little bubble of peace they had carved out in the world. Remus could hardly risk revealing their location or exposing Severus by addressing him directly, but he still sent him a coded message. He could not say much, limited by space and fears of the message being intercepted, he could not say anything explicit or too revealing. But it was important to tell him this. He bit the end of his pen (because they used pens rather than quills in the house) as he thought. He could hardly dedicate more than two lines to any of them.

_The curtains change colour three times a day_, he wrote. _Evenings are pink and orange, nights are purple_.

This should be enough to tell Severus that Harry was fine, that he was being cared for and he was happy. It wasn’t enough but it would have to be. Remus would like to tell him about the guessing games with the moving furniture, about Harry playing badminton with the poltergeist, about hearing music when Harry was dreaming. But Severus would know all of that anyway. Harry was back to changing colours around him and Severus could guess the things in between.

_The other child is fattening and getting a bit of a tan. He laughs a lot and wears a big old sweater and hasn’t complained once_.

It really was a dreadfully ugly sweater. Remus felt bad for making Draco wear it, but he really needed better clothes than what he had come with and it was the only suitable piece they found. Sirius had brought some more things later but Draco clung to the ugly sweater, saying it was actually quite soft and Remus guessed he found comfort in oversized clothes. Summer would be upon them soon, yet Draco still wore the light sweater and Sirius’ leather jacket.

_The shadows_… Remus hesitated here. Should he really write of Sirius to Severus? But then again, what would he think if he did not? Severus would probably get the wrong impression either way, so Remus would share this too. _The shadows have receded. There is healing for both, but my friend benefits more from the company._

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“We have to protect those two boys at all costs.”

Remus looked up from the bed where he was folding laundry. Sirius had abandoned the sock pairing duty to stare down the window.

“Well, of course” Remus said. He used a soft and calm tone because with Sirius you never knew. He was doing so much better now, he was upbeat and energetic and happy. But he was still paying the toll of Azkaban.

Remus dropped the shirt he had in his hands and went to the window. Sirius’ eyes were wet.

“Sirius…” Remus rested a hand on his back. He didn’t know what to say to erase that look of distress. He wasn’t sure there was anything he could say.

“You did well, Snape and you” Sirius continued. He sniffled.

“Yes?” Remus figured that this was a strong wave of emotions, but not exactly anxious apprehension or some of those dreadful waking nightmares that sometimes assaulted both of them but particularly Sirius. Sometimes Sirius spoke so much because he was genuinely happy and overjoyed at being able to feel anything again, and sometimes he did because the sound of his voice drowned the dreadful memory of the silence of Azkaban.

Remus looked through the window, to the scene that had so captured Sirius’ attention. The boys
were there, sitting in the overgrown garden with its gnome colony. Harry was chatting animatedly
about something, Remus couldn’t make out the words from that distance just the scrunch of his face
(so much like Lily’s) and the hands moving. Draco was kneeling behind him, absorbed in his task of
braiding Harry’s hair. Not a simple plait, even, but a careful arrangement of multiple small braids
with flowers intertwined.

“Let them not be touched by war” Sirius whispered, pleading. Remus was reminded of a summer
day almost eleven years ago, when Severus had said something similar, had said that Harry had
fought and paid enough.

Remus had a similar wish. Let them make it to the other side. War and darkness would eventually
reach them, but please, let them survive that with their light intact.

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There was dinner consisting of roasted vegetables with less grated cheese sprinkled on top than
everyone would have liked. The asparagus, however, were pretty good. There was a certain
reluctance to admit it at first because it was understood that it was better no to encourage Remus.
However, Harry informed them that it was in fact very important to find something with vegetables
on it and praise it to the heavens, otherwise Remus would keep trying to feed them variations and he
would rather not have to eat broccoli, thank you very much. Remus would see them eat greens, that
was a fact of life, so they should just accept it and find something tasty.

It was nice. They actually liked them.

Then Harry got in to a thinking mood. The hints were very subtle. Only Ron could tell accurately
when he was doing it, chasing a thought down a spiralling slope to its ultimate, usually hilarious,
consequences. Like the time Harry remarked that out of the Weasley children, Percy had by far the
curliest hair and five minutes later declared that Percy was too tall anyway (tall for what?) and he
was sure that if he had hairy feet the twins would have already informed him, it was just the kind if
trivia they wouldn’t lose an opportunity to share.

But Ron wasn’t there to warn them. Not that he would have. This was something he enjoyed by
himself.

Harry put the fork down and looked at Remus.

“You are thirty-six.”

“Yes, Harry.”

“You are an adult. Like, responsible. Supervising.”

“Should I be offended that I am not being included?” asked Sirius honestly curious. He wasn’t sure if
he wanted to be considered responsible.

“But- oh my god, but…” Harry made a pause to get his words in order. “You got me when I was
three.”

“A few months before, yes”

“You were twenty three. You were seven years older than I am. You were younger that Bill Weasley
is now, and he once ate a bug on a dare!”

Everybody was staring at Remus now, as if it were somehow his fault that he had been so young.
“You were the same age as Charlie the Dragon Whisperer.”

“That’s only two years older than Marcus Flint” added Draco. “He had to stay in Hogwarts an extra year because he failed his NEWTS.”

Harry needed a minute to process this realization and wonder how had he survived, because, wow, that was not an age to be taking care of anyone. He couldn’t get out of his head the image of Charlie Weasley and Marcus Flint taking care of a baby.

“I will admit that we were young and inexperienced and had absolutely no idea what to do” said Remus in his usual calm tone. “But we knew to not use Evanesco to clean you and we only dropped you on your head twice.”

“That didn’t happen.”

“I always worried about your penchant for eating spiders, but you didn’t seem to get sick so I let you do it.”

“That didn’t happen!”

Remus had had to mature quickly. First when he was bitten and then when he became a father. Besides, he was naturally careful and responsible and neat. He was the man who remembered about having a balanced diet and washing your teeth before bed and sorting your clothes for laundry. This didn’t mean he did not possess a devious sense of humour. What little mischievous streak Harry hadn’t inherited from James (and he had got plenty) he had learned from Remus. (Severus taught him how to get away with it).

“And there was a time when you were five when you pretended to be a flamingo for a whole month.”

“That didn’t happenen!”

“Please say it did and tell me more” begged Draco.

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Harry taught Draco how to play football. They made the goalies in the garden with the internationally approved goal marks (that is, backpack, jacket, tree, group of stones). They were both equally bad and the grass was too tall to be able to kick anything, but they still had fun. At some points the gnomes got tired of them running around through their lands and tried to take their ball. There was a quick conversation with both boys laying face down on the ground, inches away from the gnomes (which every book said you shouldn’t do, because what if they bit you on the face?), and soon they were playing a game of football, tallies against shorties.

Draco braided Harry’s hair a few more times. He put flowers in the dark locks and thought that with his green eyes Harry looked like a creature, like the animal familiar temporally turned in to human that Sirius and Draco had impersonated.

Harry said his patronus was a stag. Draco though he did look like a fawn. Somehow Sirius heard and started referring to them exclusively like that. Fawn and Swan.

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Dinners were never a boring affair in that house.
“I was an accident, wasn’t I?”

Sometimes, Harry was the worst. The absolute worst.

Remus was prepared for it. Remus had been there, suffering through all of it. He was inured to all sort of awkward comments and questioning, although he was starting to suspect there was something in ice-cream composition that triggered the worst of it.

Draco, too, had developed some sort of resistance to Harry saying weird things. He was there the time Harry stole the kittens they were supposed to work with in Transfigurations and brazenly told McGonagall he had no idea what she was talking about even though everyone could see the kittens moving under his jumper (because of course Harry had forgotten to put on proper robes).

Sirius, however, didn’t have the benefit of training so of course he choked on his water which may have been Harry’s purpose for all they knew.

“I mean my parents had me when they were, what? Twenty? In the middle of a war, too, you can’t tell me they planned for that.”

Remus kicked Sirius under the table. It was for his own good. These things, it was better to wait them out in silence.

“And yet there is like twenty of us on our year” said Draco with a considering look. Trust a Slytherin and Draco in particular to contemplate all the ramifications.

Harry was nodding his head. “Right, right. Children of death-eaters, I could understand, but the others…”

“And they called us irresponsible in *The Prophet* during the riots.” Draco was indignant. “We didn’t get to any hanky panky.”

“Pansy would murder you.”

“Snape would murder us. You have no idea, no, I know you have your secret chats. But you have no idea how he is as a Head of House.”

The conversation veered on that direction and whose Head of House was worst and how the Ravenclaws had it the easiest because Flitwick was a beautiful cupcake. Harry was still disappointed that he missed the common rooms tour.

Sirius regained his breath. He had to smile, too. James was never so prone to non sequiturs, but he did blurt his thoughts in a similar manner. Most famously the time he stopped a NEWT level DADA lecture to ask why exactly was the professor so sure of the description of a dementor’s mouth. Had anyone checked recently? Because it seemed to James as if someone had made it up and every book had been blindly repeating it. For all they knew dementors looked like an angry alpaca under their hoods and it was worth exploring.

Lily had been as red as her hair trying to shut down her giggles.

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“Look, Draco” Sirius said once they were well away from the house. Draco was not stupid, he knew there was something going on. Everybody had been acting odd for the last few days, sharing glances and asking questions. He took a deep breath and prepared himself for the news. If they had decided that Sirius had to tell him, it was going to be bad. “It has been said, and I believe it is a gross
exaggeration, but nevertheless it has been said that we the Blacks have a certain tendency towards uncontrolled emotionality.”

Who said that? What kind of vermin would say that? Draco was the Master of Temperance! He was Restrain and Control. He knew just how to keep a cool head at all times! He would show them! Aaargahffg.

“I won’t tell you the details because I don’t want to completely ruin the surprise” Sirius went on. He had both hands on Draco’s shoulders now. Oh, this was going to be bad. “But just so you know, I am supposed to keep you out the house for the morning because they are preparing something to celebrate your birthday. I just thought that you would like to know before hand, have a chance to compose yourse-”

Draco didn’t really hear the next words because his ears were ringing and his head felt faint and he was embarrassed already and so deeply moved! Merlin! Those idiots. They had adopted him without questions, welcomed him in their little nest and now they were doing this- They remembered (Harry, he must had known and remembered) and took time to prepare something and- His eyes had filled with tears.

“Yeah, yeah” Sirius said over him, both arms clutching him tightly and his chin resting on top of Draco’s head. “This is exactly what I feared and because they are fools, they wouldn’t understand and they would feel bad about it. Have I told you this? James’ parents passed away just a year after graduation. But still, when I was sixteen, ah, you are turning sixteen too! Anyway, when I was sixteen they let me move in with them and even offered to adopt me and let me tell you but I bawled when I heard. Fifteen minutes of tears and snot, I kid you not. It was horrible. One of the most embarrassing moments in my life. I cried so hard I was dehydrated.”

“You asked McGonagall out” mumbled Draco from inside the embrace. Sirius’ shirt was starting to get wet already, he could feel it against his cheek. “How is that not the top one?”

“Oh, it’s definitely top ten.” Sirius answered gently patting Draco’s head. “And I can’t tell you about the top one because everyone involved has been sworn to secrecy. Peter had an asthma attack and Shacklebot who was a prefect, I must say, and held to a higher standard, laughed so hard that he pissed himself and still no one held that against him.”

Draco chuckled. In a few minutes he would be ready to step back.

Sirius kept petting his head. “They look so clueless, but Potters are sneaky, aren’t they? They have a way to dig their claws in your heart.”

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Despite Sirius’ warning, Draco couldn’t help getting emotional. Although he did avoid the twenty minutes of ugly crying and simply got the much more dignified speechlessness and a bit of wet eyes.

They had prepared a nice meal for the day, with roasted potatoes and melted cheese. Nothing compared to the feasts in Hogwarts or the delicacies from the manor, but to Draco it was delicious and wonderful anyway and he could feel his stomach opening. And there was a cake, which explained why Harry had flour on his forehead and the frame of his glasses. Harry Potter had memorized cake recipes. He couldn’t tell you what spell to use to light a candle, but he could make a cake from memory and Draco had never in his life held higher hopes for the war that was coming.

They sang him Happy Birthday. Despite being only three of them, they could not agree on the pitch or tempo. Sirius kept the last “you” for thirty seconds longer after everyone had finished. Remus
elbowed him because he was not allowed to howl, only he was.

***

Remus was teaching the boys all the important things. Practical ways to defend yourself from dark creatures, how to bypass some curses without a wand and even some healing procedures. He also taught them how to budget and a few ways to access their accounts on Gringotts because indeed the globlins did not snitch, ever, and they didn’t care if an escaped criminal requested for some funds to be dropped at certain locations. They would want a signature, though.

(This was all part of the plan to protect them at all costs. Make them self-sufficient in case Sirius or him went missing. Make them promise that they would look after themselves and each other and don’t take any risks. That had been an ugly evening, when they made them promise that.)

Sirius had to teach them about all the other important stuff. How to dress and how to shave (not much in that area yet) and how to charm people into giving you information. How to look like you meant business so people would leave you alone if you ever had to hide in the less reputable places. How to find those places. How to look like someone else, so you wouldn’t be remembered or recognized. (Even if Harry had that part solved).

And then, on a fateful day, Sirius decided they were old enough and that he ought to teach them how to seduce a girl. It was such a good class, too! He told them how to smile and how to look and how to find your style and colours that complimented you and always be respectful of her, of course, you can’t go around making promises you won’t keep. Show her a good time, remember to brush your tongue when you do your teeth. Use protection and be respectful.

He would have died to have someone tell him all this at sixteen rather than having to figure it out all by himself. This was life saving intel.

And yet they boys were looking at him quite disinterested. Sirius could not believe it.

“Of course, this is also applicable to boys” he said tentatively. He shouldn’t had assumed.

But still, no reaction.

Draco spoke first. He was a pureblood. He would marry whoever his family thought adequate. He hadn’t given much thought to it. What was the point when his future had already been decided? Why bother looking at someone, when he knew it could never be? That seemed like settling up for heartbreak and it was unnecessary. Besides, he had had many other things in his mind. Like Quidditch and class conscience and systems of oppression. No time for romance at all.

“But there must have been a girl you preferred” said Sirius.

“Ah, well. I do like Pansy, she is very spirited. We were sort of together, but she doesn’t like me that way.”

“Now, Draco, this is why you need to practice the smouldering look.”

“Pretty sure she prefer girls.”

“Ah.” Sirius looked down, dejected. Nothing to do then.

Harry didn’t say anything, but he gave him a look. It was terrible. A look made of the wind on the top of a mountain, a look made of a moor with an unending horizon.
Harry’s look said: “To the place I’m going, I shouldn’t drag anyone with me.”

He blinked and it was gone. Harry made a joke with James’ voice, Draco answered, the banter filled the air and the sun shone. Sirius looked at Harry closely but he seemed genuinely happy, he was not pretending.

***

Harry had his t-shirt inside out and a blue sock on his left hand, like a puppet. This was indicative of a burning question that had interrupted all other thought (and dressing) processes.

“I haven’t seen you use your wand. How come you are not doing magic? We can do magic with adults around.”

“Mmmrire mmrah Brahmy.”

“Oh, yes, sorry.” Harry waited patiently for Draco to spit the toothpaste. “So?”

Draco didn’t want to talk about it. If he said so Harry would drop the topic, he was quite sure of it. He found himself speaking anyway, he had told Sirius and Remus, after all.

“That is such a great idea!” exclaimed Harry. “I should have thought of it ages ago. Should have broken my wand.”

“Please don’t go break your wand now, it’s the only one we have we may need it some day.”

“Yes, but it is such a good idea!”

Just in case, Draco followed Harry. Sirius and Remus had left to run some errands, pick up money and the post two towns away, so it obviously fell to Draco to make sure Harry didn’t burn down the house. Or break his wand.

Now spending the morning in a melee football game in which gnomes, boys, and a poltergeist participated was a different thing, because the poltergeist hadn’t tried murdering any of them in weeks and the gnomes were not the tiny blood thirsty savages books described.

They also went to the second floor and the room with no roof and lay together looking at the sky and listening to Harry’s music. The Walkman was seeing less use lately. Harry didn’t have such a mad need to take shelter in music. Neither of them did.

***

Remus received a letter from Severus. He had good teacher’s handwriting. The letters clear despite the tiny size so he could fit more information.

Glad. That was the first word and all the acknowledgement of the things Remus had told him. Severus could be ruthlessly practical and he would not waste more space than necessary talking about his feelings.

A storm is coming. He went on. One wants the prophecy. The Professor and the Politician want the child. The Politician and the Father want the other child, but he burned him from the family tree. Everybody is searching. Carry on as you are.

The last words worried Remus the most. Fifteen years they had waited to see this. New DADA teacher: Snape.
Fifteen years and only three decent teachers in all that time, one of them a deatheater in disguise. Remus worried. At last Dumbledore had accepted Severus’ request and Remus worried that Severus would have to be the one to prepare those poor students for what was coming.

Severus would not waste time or space on his emotions and for that he could seem cold and uncaring. However, Remus knew him to be a hopeless romantic with a sensitive soul.

Remus unfolded the envelope with careful fingers, pressing down the creases of the paper. Inside, with the same careful handwriting, was a recipe for an ache relief potion, one that hardly required any magic ingredients to prepare. And if you turned the paper upside down, in between the lines with different ink there was another recipe for the nausea associated with the moon.

***

Harry baked his own birthday cake. It was agreed by everyone that one should not have to bake their own cake, but Harry, being Chief Baker, insisted on doing it because he would like to have something actually edible. Remus… perhaps Remus could do it given time and a very detailed recipe, although he never cooked twice the same thing, always had to change it a little bit and that is very risky in baking. Draco was too used to magic, but in a few weeks’ time with some more practice he would stir by hand just as well as by wand.

Sirius, if he somehow managed to get himself so lost as to set actual foot in the kitchen, should gently yet firmly be led outside immediately.

“You asked me to crack the eggs, I cracked the eggs” pointed Sirius.

“You obliterated the eggs against the corner of the counter.”

“Well, can’t you just scoop them up?”

Sirius, who was a highly intelligent wizard with extensive knowledge of Transfigurations and Charms, hell, who had devised the adaptation of the tracking *homenum revelio* charm used in the Marauders Map, Sirius, in all his brilliant glory, was a Potion menace the likes of which dwarfed even Longbottom’s most disastrous lessons.

Honestly, the mutual dislike with Snape seemed only natural.

“He only passed because of your mother” Remus said. “He would pilfer spoonfuls of her cauldron to add to his own.”

“I did not! That only happened twice, thrice at most.”

Draco, who had been ascended to chocolate melting duty, looked crestfallen at the revelation of his hero’s shortcomings.

“Nobody understands it because Sirius is quite a powerful wizard otherwise.” Remus went on “Have you told them about your bike?”

He had not. He used to own a muggle bike which he enchanted to fly like a broom. It significantly helped him to reclaim his status as the Cool Authoritative Figure, not that it had ever been in much danger because Moony insisted on them eating vegetables and keeping proper sleep hours for Merlin’s sake.

Sirius found a place in the counter where he made himself comfortable and chattered merrily while they cooked and baked around him. It was actually very nice, the mingling aromas slowly rising and
Sirius’ voice accompanying their movements. It was, in fact, excellent and Harry didn’t need any other gift.

And Draco got a gift too, even if it was not his birthday.

“And it’s all lies, because even if the last three Potions teachers have been Slytherins, that means nothing. Not all Slytherins are good at it. And you can be in another house and be good, too. Look at Harry or Lily. But they said I was bad because I was in Gryffindor and a blood traitor which, excuse me, but is a fu-”

“Sirius!” Remus growled in a low warning voice.

“Freaking load of Hippogriff manure, because at least I never confused sparkly dust with fairy dust.”

“Godric’s girdle! Who would do that?” Draco exclaimed, laughing. He was hunched over, focused on the delicate task of shaping the cookie dough. “Not even Longbottom did that”

Harry frowned and bit his lower lip. “Were you not in class that day? We stopped him just in time.” He was in charge of the last stages of cake baking, but he had generously released some dough and ingredients so they (and by they he meant Draco) could also make cookies. Remus had soon abandoned the task and was leaning against the wall opposite Sirius offering corrections to the running commentary and occasionally reaching for something high or opening a jar.

“AND” Sirius went on, because twenty years was not enough time to forgive the affront. “I never sneezed inside my cauldron.”

“You did. Multiple times. In other people’s cauldrons too.”

“… and I certainly never sneezed so hard that I dropped the candy I was eating in class inside the potion.”

“That is true” Remus conceded.

“And if that had happened, which it didn’t, but if it had, I believe I would have enough sense to quickly retrieve the candy rather than let it melt inside and create whatever that was, I don’t know, there were screams and something in the shape of a leopard running around and they had to close the dungeons for two days.”

Draco was shaking so hard with laugh er he could not utter a sound. Harry had tears in his eyes.

“And that was all a pureblood Slytherin, and I don’t see anyone giving him grief for it” Sirius finished.

“Who?” Harry attempted to ask, or perhaps Draco. The boys were now leaning against each other so they wouldn’t fall. So this is why Jungleries were so strictly forbidden in Snape’s class. Everybody thought it was to avoid accidental chokings when students swallowed them whole in terror.

“Sirius, who did that?” Harry asked again.

“Ah, well…” For some reason now Sirius seemed doubtful. “I thought this would be common knowledge.”

“Oh, dear, no” Draco was wiping tears away and in the process filling his face with cocoa powder. “It is not. Not even in the Slytherin common room.”
“Right, right.”

“Who -?”

“Listen” Sirius interrupted. “Most of this happened before I went to Hogwarts, and the last incident occurred while I was on my first year, so perhaps this had been slightly exaggerated.”

It was not. It was not exaggerated in the least. Sirius just felt bad because it occurred to him that perhaps he shouldn’t trash talk like that one Lucius Abraxas Malfoy who, by the way, did not even attempt to take his OWL level Potion class so there would be no record of him failing ignominiously.

***

Strawberries. It was high summer and they were living near a forest, of course Draco and Harry had gone to pick up wild strawberries. Harry still had the taste on his lips. Draco was sweating under his leather jacket, but he clung to it desperately and there was no way to make him give it up. They were both smiling.

They were returning to the house through the little backdoor in the garden fence, not because they were hiding, but because of something as simple and innocent as the fact that it was closer. They didn’t want to walk around the whole property to enter through the main door.

An invisible force pushed them back.

“Ouf.”

“What.”

“Potter remove yourself from my chest immediately.”

Harry snorted and pushed himself up and then helped Draco back to his feet. They tried to enter again and again they were rejected.

This happened two more times.

“Colin, is that you?” Harry said smiling.

“If he has decided to kick you out of the house for giving him such a pedestrian name, I won’t be surprised.” Draco fixed his clothes and made a show of crossing the door after taking an imaginary hat from his head and bowing.

Only he was immediately pushed back.

The first two minutes, they actually thought it was a fun joke and they laughed about it. But then Harry crouched to take a few pebbles to throw to the windows and Draco started to call for Sirius or Remus to let them in and then…

Colin the resident spirit suddenly wasn’t so friendly anymore. Harry found himself pressed down to the ground. He heard a thud and caught a flash of silver out of the corner of his eye. Draco was on the floor, too, both unable to move and starting to sweat with fear as they felt that familiar presence sitting on their chests, a cold hand pressing down over their mouths.

They could not move.

*They could not move.*
Harry had no idea of what was going on, only that Colin let Draco up first.

(Because Draco was his favourite. Colin played more with Harry, but he liked the way Draco talked to him, so ceremoniously). Draco got up and Harry heard him run to the corner of the fence. He stopped there. He- he did not run to the front door.

He ran back.

“Thank you Mr. Hoarfrost” Draco said. Of course if Harry was going to name him, Draco had to make sure to put his piece there too and he gave him a lastname. “I got him. Thank you, please, thank you. The bag…”

Harry had seen with relief as Draco’s face appeared back before his eyes, but now he felt as if Colin’s icy hands had sunk in his heart and stomach. He felt Colin moving back, just as Draco got him by the shoulders, still begging madly.

“The bag… with his things. The wand. Don’t let them… Don’t let them find anything, please, please. Save the wand, they will know the wand.”

“Draco, what-”

“We have to stay here.” Draco’s fingers were like talons on his arms. “I am so sorry.”

“But…”

The poltergeist went back to the house, apparently intent on conquering the title of Most Haunted House in Known History. They could hear the shrieks from there, awful and high and just like the sound of Death angered. There was broken glass and smashed furniture. A window opened and Harry’s bag squeezed through and came flying towards them. The window smashed shut and what remained of the roof trembled. There was another scream, higher and louder and carrying more weight. The kitchen was on fire.

He knew what it was. Harry was a very bad student but he was not stupid. He knew, but he didn’t want to know. He wanted someone to tell him he was wrong, as he so often was in class, that it was something else.

“Come on” Draco was saying, helping him up and leading him back to treeline. “We have to go, come on.”

There was a thunderous noise, loud, loud. So loud it muted Harry and whatever he might have said. He didn’t know himself, if he was crying, or begging, or cursing Draco or simply repeating the word “No”. The noise went up and took the roof with it, hovering three meters above the rest of the house and spinning over itself counter clockwise. All the smaller objects in the house were dragged up into the whirlpool.

They were back in the trees now, hidden from view. Draco was trembling, shaking, but his arms were still around Harry holding him fast. He may have been saying something too. Pleading words lost in the whirl of noise and wind.

The floating objects started to explode. First the little ones, pop, pop, pop pop, the spoons and the toothbrushes. Then the clothes caught on fire and the flames engulfed everything else.

As they went further back in to the forest and a bit to the left to take the trail, they came to see another angle of the house. This is what Draco had seen. Harry saw a wizard desperately holding to a window frame, his gold-lined robes flapping up in the wind. Another was ineffectually trying to
douse the flames and a third one was legging it, running for the security that offered the other side of the fence where two more of his workmates were cowering.

It had been Harry’s birthday and they had been happy and a few weeks later they had come to take it all.

***

Draco was counting his blessings. Blessing number 1, Harry hadn’t run back to the house and attempted to fight all the Ministry wizards with a handful of pebbles. He didn’t trash against Draco’s arms (not too much) and he didn’t give away their location with his screams. Blessing number 2, they had a wand, Blessing number 3, it was not raining. Blessing number 4, there was a remarkable lack of giant spiders on fire.

This was as much as Draco could count.

He was not counting his losses.

He took them as far away as possible, a whole hour of march through the fields before he let them sit down and then lie on the ground and cry.

Well, he cried. Harry did nothing. Harry was… gone. He seemed to have retreated into himself and Draco would seriously worry about it except that he couldn’t, not now. All he could do was count his blessings like the fact that he didn’t have to work harder at pulling Harry back from the house. He found himself wishing Weasley were there. He would know how to snap Harry out of it without making him go into his wild, “I will fight everything” mode.

Draco was not counting his losses. He was not thinking about Sirius and Remus. He was not obsessing about the little details of the glimpses he had caught of the wizards (Aurors and Special Operators) coming to the house. He was not going through the images again and again.

The moon had been just two nights ago and Remus had been tired. Draco wasn’t thinking about that, either.

Draco, for all the dramatic flair of the Malfoys and the Black, could keep a level mind on a crisis. He had learned to see a situation through and push the crying and panicking for later. He cried now, a little bit, to get the edge off. He pushed everything down, the fear and hurt that was threatening to drown him, he pushed them down to his stomach where they often lived, and let his mind clear to think what they should do. Flee. Hide.

***

They arrived in London with the night. That weird hour of grey light, not so dark to turn the lights on but not so clear that you can see either. The hour when a jacket was too much but a shirt was too little.

They stepped down from the Knight Bus and Draco thanked the driver profusely. Just as he didn’t count his losses, he very carefully didn’t think how he had learned to do this. How it occurred to him to pass his jacket (Sirius’ jacket) to Harry and pushed his hair down to cover his scar and take Harry’s glasses for himself (the kid was almost blind, by the way). How to give the image of two foreign students who had drank a bit too much and had a bit too much fun and if they didn’t return to their group instantly they were going to be killed by the French equivalent of Minerva McGonagall. People looked at the accent and forgot everything else (“We ‘ave need to go à London” Draco had said and the whole bus had cringed), they looked and they saw two foreign young boys being
disgustingly foreign and irresponsible. They didn’t see.

He had paid for the tickets with a cheque, twenty two sickles to be taken from Gringotts vault Number 711. Draco made the signature just as Remus had taught them.

The bus left immediately, vanishing without a second thought for the two teenagers it left behind. Still, Draco had not given their final destination, just in case someone read The Prophet later and got ideas.

They were just two or three streets away from the house. The house that had popped in Draco’s mind, that he knew would be uninhabited and reasonably safe. Thankfully, Harry seemed to start waking up from his shock and was able to quietly direct them because Draco was confused with the street layout. He knew Diagon Alley and he knew other wizarding districts, but he wasn’t used to so many streets and houses and walking. Rich people never walk except on beautiful designated spaces. You walked down the pretty part of Diagon Alley to let yourself be seen but you didn’t walk to Burrington’s (inconveniently located outside Diagon Alley in somewhere called Savile Road) you flooed or apparated there.

They arrived to the street just as the grey light turned into shadows. The lampposts were just turning on and Draco had to take a deep breath and squeeze Harry’s hand (he had no idea when they had started to hold hands, but he was not letting go). It looked horrible. The light was horrible, the street was horrible and the house was horrible and he would give all the gold in the Malfoy vault if he could just go back to their haunted house.

They came to the gate. There was a short path of paved stone and three steps to the door.

There was also fifty silent breaths, and the night coming, and holding hands for comfort, and the impossibility to move and give a step forward.

“Let’s go through the back” said Harry. Those were his first words in hours.

They walked together all the way to the end of the street and around, to the back of the line of houses. The rear of the buildings had plain brickwork with no adornments. No one important was supposed to come to the houses this way.

The backyard for the number twelve had an old wood fence. Tall enough to keep eyes away, but not so tall that they couldn’t jump over it and come to a grim sad patio with overgrown poisonous plants and a derelict shack where they probably kept the gardening tools and the brooms. A tendril of Devil’s snare creeped towards them, but they were both so crestfallen it quickly retired back.

There was a door with flaking white paint. The typical door in between stairs, down to the kitchens or up to the living and dining rooms. Draco had no idea how they were going to open it. If it was locked they could use Alohomora, only that would call the Ministry wizards and Harry may have been able to fool them before but right now the most he could do was depress them, if he reacted at all.

He was thinking that they could find something in the shed, or even spend the night there if need be, but it didn’t matter because the door seemed to recognize him. There was a wave of warmth extending from the doorknob to the rest of the frame and the door opened under Draco’s hand.

***

They stood there in the backstairs landing silent and unmoving for close to ten minutes. Nobody had to know this.
Perhaps they held hands the whole time.

The house was silent and unused and dead. These are all passive traits, yet it managed to make them active. Like it was forcing its silence and death on you. It was a sensation similar to stepping below a bridge, the sudden absence of light and that pungent smell of rot and old mud.

There was a house elf. He may have come as soon as they opened the door or he may have just appeared, it wasn’t important. They had only just noticed him.

“I” said Draco with confidence “am Draco Malfoy, son of Narcissa Black, godson of Regulus Black. And this” he lifted the hand that was still holding Harry’s “is Harry Potter, godson of Sirius Black, last living male member of the main branch. And by our shared entitlement and inheritance, by the blood line, and by the sacred line of guardianship, we claim this, the house of the Black family, as ours.”

The elf did not seem very happy about this, but he was a house-elf and he would obey. Draco’s claim speech had been good. Perhaps not so good that a lawyer couldn’t pick it apart, but good enough that the house would have to accept them. It had let them in, in the first place. Besides, there were not many competitors that could claim the house and they certainly weren’t there right now.

They went downstairs, to the kitchen, to further horrify the house-elf who was sure no proper Black had ever set foot on the kitchen in a hundredth years. (He was lying, Sirius and Regulus used to come down and help themselves to food all the time). The elf actually whimpered when he saw Draco opening a cabinet.

“Enough of this” Draco said in a mimicry of his father’s most commanding tone. “You will not tell nor facilitate the knowledge of our presence here to anyone. Now you will go, in silence, and cover every portrait in the house.”

“And every mirror!” he added as the elf started to move. You just couldn’t trust mirrors, anything could come crawling out of them

It was a good precaution but thinking of it seemed to take what little energy he had left. He collapsed on a chair, drained of everything. Now Draco could cry and flail as much as he wanted to, but he was so tired no tears would come.

***

“When… When they took him, and me, the last time.”

It was night. They were both sitting on the floor with the remains of their dinner between them. There was a perfectly serviceable table with chairs right there in the kitchen, but somehow it had felt more adequate to sit on the old stone floor, sides pressed together.

They had eaten in silence. Like animals. Eating because it is an imperative, you need food to survive, but with no thought spared for the taste.

No thought spared for anything.

But now Harry spoke. Now he felt himself with enough strength to speak, with the need to speak. He had to fill the silence and the space between him and Draco.

“I had done a bit of magic before, you know. Mostly around the house. It was warded, the house. When they came, they came at night in a full moon, and I fought them… and I just, I remember that they apparated me to somewhere and I set the room on fire. I don’t know why I’m telling you this, I
have never told anyone. I just, the paper and the fabric in the chairs and the curtains and the robes of
the wizards, everything. I set on fire everything."

He remembered being surprised and frightened and not knowing how he had done it or why he
wasn’t burning. He was afraid of not being able to control it but at the same time he didn’t want it to
stop.

“And then, I don’t know, they casted petrificus totalus or something and they sent me to sleep and
the next day they gave me a talk and took me to the Dursleys.”

It was like a religious ritual. A whole different kind of magic, one with words weaved in a half lit
kitchen. A magic that was profound and terrible and cleansing.

“I couldn’t do any magic after that. I know… everybody knows I’m almost a squib most of the time,
but those months until Christmas, I could do nothing. Ron used to share his work with me, you
know. Remember when McGonagall had us turning matches into needles? He would do half of one
for me and then another for himself so it would look like I had done something.”

There was… relief. Both in saying and listening to those words.

Draco was next. He opened his mouth and the words came pouring. The summer after the adoption
hearing. Words he hadn’t shared with anyone. Severus had known, somehow, and spared him the
necessity to voice them. Sirius and Remus had guessed enough through the image Draco had painted
for them. But this was the first time he told anyone of the beating and not just the beating, because it
was merely physical pain and he could suffer it, but the more profound hurt of his father inflicting
pain on him.

Harry told him about the cupboard under the stairs. About how it wasn’t that bad in itself, but it had
brought some memories, a feeling of being so small and alone and weak he didn’t want to experience
ever again. How that first week with the Dursleys all he wanted was for the earth to swallow him
alive.

Draco spoke of avoiding his father, of being the perfect son mostly by being absent. Of the fear and
of how, after that terrible time, hitting him became his father’s answer for everything, every
transgression.

They talked and talked until they realized they were thirsty and tired and starting to get cold, sitting
there in the kitchen floor. It was a horrible day and a horrible night and they both felt hurting and
raw. But it was healing in a way.

“We should go find a room to sleep” said Draco. “We will have to be quiet so the portraits don’t hear
us.”

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The house was big and rich despite its current derelict status. Four floors plus the kitchen in the
basement. It had everything to make it better than most city houses and yet if felt less welcoming that
the actual haunted house with half a roof in which they had spent the summer.

There was a copy of The Prophet on the library. To Draco’ surprise, it was a recent one. But then
again, no, no surprise at all. A good house would have a standing subscription, one that no one had
bothered to cancel after the death of the matriarch. The elf would bring the paper in and after a day
he would exchange it for the new one, a pointless ritual repeated through the years because that was
how pureblood families were. There was today’s special edition announcing the double arrest of
Britain’s most feared fugitives Remus Lupin and Sirius Black.

As if the Lestrange hadn’t escaped in January. Draco couldn’t understand how the paper didn’t self combust in embarrassment at the blatant lies printed there. He couldn’t believe Fudge’s smug expression under the headline BLACK AND LUPIN CAPTURED: MINISTER BRINGS SAFETY.

Still, Draco stood there, reading every line of the stupid news that claimed there had been a deep and thorough ministerial investigation when the arrest was most likely due to chance or someone snitching. There was no mention of Harry’s presence. They hadn’t known to look for one or two teenagers. Draco had a thought, an ugly adult Slytherin thought, that Sirius and Remus would maybe had let themselves be arrested if it meant keeping the wizards away from the house and the boys.

There was nothing else of use in the paper and yet Draco read it all again, standing unmoving in the middle of the library. And so he was still there when Kreacher came with the evening special edition on a silver tray.

They really had to keep their presence a secret. Merlin knew how many of these paintings had pictures in other houses or in Hogwarts, what they could hear and what they could say, and to whom. Draco didn’t want to find what would happen if someone heard rumours of sudden movement in the ancestral Black house.

“HAR-”

Draco left the library, the evening paper clutched in his hands. “Harry!” he whispered frantically.

Chapter End Notes

I did warn that the series was taking a turn to the dark(er). But don’t you fret, they will be fine.
Fun fact, the books never explained how Sirius managed to get his wand after his escape from Azkaban.
The man tending the kiosk in the pub. Sirius had never liked the look of him.

Or maybe some of the werewolves that often mingled with the clientele. Perhaps one of them recognized Remus.

Sirius really didn’t like the kiosk man. He was unnecessarily rude and surly and seemed to take affront at people coming to the pub to drink rather than to buy his meagre selection of newspapers and sweets.

But maybe it was none of them. Maybe the Ministry had decided to send some wizards to a random town near Coventry. Maybe it was just bad luck that they came across them. Neither of them was supposed to go to the town that day. But they needed milk and eggs and Sirius could carry them but Remus had to go because he was the one who could figure out the muggle money and he had said that he was not too tired from the transformation.

Did it matter?

They had put on a good fight, made them work for their catch. But still, caught they were and they hadn’t wasted any time in apparating them to the front of the Ministry. They had been pushed or dragged through the doors and down a corridor and many flights of stairs. They had been shoved against every sharp corner they came across and pushed down the last few stair steps. Sirius’ hands and knees were scratched and bruised from that, but he was not complaining.

Every five heartbeats or so there was a soft “plick” sound. A drop of blood falling to the floor. Remus had been weak and sleepy, as he always was after a transformation. The three stunning spells didn’t help, either.

They were both tied to a chair in a dark room. It was cold, despite its small size. Sirius had goosebumps on his skin.

Plick… plick… plick…

There was blood running from Remus’ nose. At some point a witch in a Special Operator uniform had produced a handkerchief and cleaned his face a bit. But then another witch, shorter and stouter, had entered the room and conjured a long silver chain to add to Remus’ restraints. The chain had sunk in the flesh and cut it open, and now there was also blood running down Remus’ arms and to the floor. A slow trickle, like the passing of time. Plick, plick, plick.

Sirius was the alleged mass murdered. The man who supposedly betrayed his friends and killed twelve muggles. But one doesn’t simply put a pureblood in chains. Chains are for lesser beings.
Half-breeds.

The door opened a third time and in came one of the wizards who had captured them accompanied by a young man with neatly combed wavy red hair. Sirius noticed with pleasure that the first wizard was sporting multiples scratches and his robes were torn.

“… a bust, I’m afraid” he was saying. “Grade 5 sentient spirit, completely uninhabitable.”

“I am sorry to hear, sir” answered the, ah well, who was Sirius kidding? It was a Weasley. A Weasley or a Prewett, and there were none of those left.

“Nothing to do about it. Still, we have these two now and the good wizards and witches of Britain will sleep more easily tonight.”

“Half-breeds and traitors” said the young man with a tone cold and sharp like the surgeon’s knife that removes the tumour. He wrinkled his nose as if he were repulsed by their sight. “Well I for one can say that I am glad they will be taken out of the streets. Wand?” he added, offering from the full size box of chocolate wands he was carrying. It is so easy to be dismissive of those that are tied and chained.

“The Minister will be pleased” answered the man, McTaggert read the embroidery on the front of his robes, waving his hand to decline the offer of chocolate treats. “We leave them under your custody, Weasley. I will start the arrangements to transport them to Azkaban right away.”

Of course they would not get a trial.

There was some papers to be signed and then McTaggert left and it was just the two of them and the young man. He didn’t look like much, except for how he had the same look as the short fat woman with the chains, like he wouldn’t think much about hurting them. They were both tied up which seemed a bit unnecessary, Remus was seriously injured and Sirius had taken his fair share of jinxes. But obviously after he had managed to break out of his bonds (chairs these days, so fragile) and knocked someone over, they were not taking any more chances.

So very little chances that they intended to send them straight back to Azkaban. No trial, no interrogation. No interrogation meant that they already knew everything or that they knew nothing. If they had found the boys, Sirius supposed someone would have let it slip. They were not very careful with information. He had already learned that Fudge was scared shitless for his position and that he needed a political victory yesterday; that they had figured they might have been hiding in the haunted house (yes) and that Colin had not welcomed them (double yes and huzza to Colin).

If they had found the boys, Sirius kept telling himself, they would have mentioned it in an insult to Remus at the very least. He had tried to say so to Remus in one of the long moments when they were left alone, but Remus had shushed him. Who knew if there was someone listening?

The young Weasley looked around the room, preening like a beautiful peacock. His eyes when he looked at them however were distant and detached, as if he were looking past them.

“They will be back in an hour” Weasley said blinking quickly and focusing his baby blue eyes back on them. “This time, you won’t be able to break out from Azkaban.”

“We will see about that” Sirius snarled right back. He was not giving up so easily on this life he had just started living. Remus said nothing, all his strength focused on not passing out.

“No, we won’t.” The young Weasley sounded extremely calm. It was kind of eery, he spoke as if his word were law. More than law. As if his word were fact. How was that line again? And the Word
became flesh. That’s how the young man spoke, as if the mere action of uttering the words made them real.

What a horrible thing that he spoke so about the prison. Sirius just- he- he couldn’t, he couldn’t do it again. He could not survive that place but he could not tolerate the idea of dying in that wretched place.

“You will attempt to escape in the trip to Azkaban” Weasley went on still calm “or that’s what they will say at the very least, and you will arrive to the island dead.”

The room was taken by silence. Suddenly it felt as if the walls and even the ceiling and the floor were made of white marble. There was a faint smell of dust and rosemary and for a second Sirius got a mad image of a mausoleum or a temple in Greece, of a woman with white eyes and a hard voice. He felt the heat of a relentless sun shining in a southern sky, a sky as blue as the young Weasley’s eyes.

Percy Weasley sighted. “This is not what I had planned” he muttered resignedly. “But I may as well”.

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The curse of the third child

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Percy didn’t have the social charm of his oldest brother William, nor the athletic disposition of his second oldest brother Charles. Percy was just the dull bookish child in between the first two and the explosive happiness of the twins.

That was all right. All Percy wanted in life was to experience serenity, to know true calm. To be safe in a boring, predictable, life. The bane of Percy’s life was uncertainty.

Bill was, by far, the brightest of the Weasley’s children and despite their lack of good grades the twins were probably right behind. However, Percy was the most hard worker and so he excelled in all his classes. He had a clearly delineated path to success and therefore to economical stability, which would be a very nice thing to have. Any kind of stability really because growing up in the Burrow was a permanent chaos. So unlike his younger brothers Percy didn’t shy away from the hardest subjects and he took Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as electives.

He also took Divination. The one and only time Percy did something outside the script. His mother and his brother Charlie thought there was some pretty girl (or boy, because Molly was his mother and a mother knows) in that class. Bill and the twins though maybe he wanted to take an easy subject to keep his grades’ average high and, possibly, Percy wanted to give the impression of not being completely boring.

There was a little of truth in that. It was ridiculously easy to get good grades in that class and it gave Percy free time to focus on his other classes. This is the reason why he kept taking it to his NEWT levels.

But the reason why he took it in the first place was that puberty came with a little something extra for Percival Weasley.

It was that weird feeling that made him dislike Harry at first glance, told him the boy was trouble even though Percy felt honestly sorry for him. The same feeling behind his loathing of Dumbledore even though everybody in the family saw him as a golden unicorn that farted diamond dust. The
irrational feeling why he suddenly couldn’t stand his beloved childhood pet.

He thought about killing Scabbers. That was such a strange, horrible, thought to have for your pet that it gave Percy nausea. He gave it to Ron hoping that he would keep the rat safe and hoping that he would feel better about it, but he did not, he did not. He still wanted the rat dead and away from his brother. He gave treats to the cats whenever they chased Scabbers and then he hated himself for it, for having this sick twisted thoughts because truly there was no one as despicable as him.

Percy saw nothing in the tea leaves in Trelawney’s class. The crystal ball remained foggy grey…

But on the summer of his sixth year, just as he became an adult and the family took the trip to Egypt, Percy woke up with a clear stone-and-gold thought in his mind that told him *Today, you die.*

It was actually a pretty horrible thought to wake up to. He was so distressed that something must have shown on his face. His mother, thinking that he was still upset about the twins’ prank in the pyramid, changed the vacation plan and they went to see the museum, like Percy wanted, instead of going to the beach. Everybody complained (well, not Bill, he wanted to visit the museum too) and by night the thought in Percy’s head had crumbled to dust.

The next day Percy saw in a muggle newspaper the report of a traffic accident, sixteen injured, in the same route they would have taken. He looked at the photo and saw, as if he had been there, the bus overturning and himself extending his right arm to keep Ginny in her seat and being thrown through the window…

Percy Weasley just wanted a dull life. He had a smart older brother and a strong second brother and he was all right with being the third and unremarkable one.

He spent his first year after Hogwarts focusing on his promising professional career and drinking calming tea by the gallon, deep in denial about the sick knot in his stomach. He really, really, really didn’t want to think about that.

***

A long hour after disappearing, Harry Potter returned to the centre of the maze in the third trial.

It had been almost two years since that day in Egypt. Percy, smart, hard working Percy, had had a lot of time to think in between denying there was anything to think about.

He had known about Ginny. He had known there was something wrong with her and it was not the twins’ teasing or missing their parents or adapting the school. It was something else, Percy knew it and yet he hadn’t known well enough to do anything about it, other than a general worry for his little sister.

He had felt something wrong the moment the dementors came to Hogwarts, but not enough to stop his brother Ron from getting hurt. Almost stabbed and his ankle twisted. And he had been right about the Scabbers! Dear Merlin and Morgana. He had been right and if only Percy had followed his instincts when he turned fourteen and crushed the little vermin in his fist then everything would have been better. But he hadn’t because he wasn’t sure, because it was all a foggy feeling and a blurry image.

But he had had no doubts about himself, never about himself. He knew when something bad was going to happen to him. He had known that time in the Egyptian road but he also knew with the lesser accidents. The prank candy from Fred and George that would make him puke, the awkward fall from his broom when he accepted Oliver’s invitation to fly on a windy day, even the small burn
The bane of Percy’s life was uncertainty. So he decided to make things certain.

You can’t take an unbreakable vow by yourself. Vows are supposed to be done between two people and there needs to be a third party to be the Bonder.

Soon Percy would have to leave Hogwarts with the Triwizard Championship delegation, but there was a little bit of time. Professor Moody turning out to be an escaped deatheater (presumed death) made for a very convenient distraction. Percy sneaked into the castle and down the corridors to the little known cloister in the north-east wing. It was a quiet place, seldom visited. Percy used to go to study there when he felt like getting some sun and fresh air without all the noise of other students.

There were four statues of the Founding Four in the middle of the little garden, each facing a different corner. Percy went to the one of Godric Gryffindor, tall and strong and with a big moustache. The statues’ right hand was holding his wand high in the air while the left rested on the pommel of a stone sword.

“I need to make an unbreakable vow to myself” Percy said to the statue, panting. “Please, be so kind as to be my Bonder.”

The statue blinked. His stone face adopted a puzzled expression.

“I’m in a bit of a hurry, sir, please.”

The statue said nothing, but the hand holding the wand in the air lowered a little bit. His head turned sideways in confusion as Percy kneeled in front of him and clasped his wrists. Technically, unbreakable vows were to be taken between two persons but, really, as long as you had two hands (or a hand and a very flexible foot) you should be able to take one by yourself once you found a Bonder. The Bonder was the key element.

He made a small motion with his elbow trying to politely impress his urgency. Gryffindor kept his bemused expression and did nothing. Percy expected more from a wizard who also carried a sword.

“Excuse me, young man. What are you doing?” asked the statue of Rowena Ravenclaw peering from under Gryffindor’s raised arm.

“I need to make a vow that if anyone in my family dies, I will, too, within twenty four hours.”

By then the four statues had all abandoned their usual positions and had turned to stared at Percy kneeling as he was by Gryffindor’s feet. Gryffindor had now his wand hand clutched protectively over his chest, like a lady who had received an indecent proposition or as if Percy had suggested he dunked his wand on a spider nest.

“That is a way to ensure it. Very ingenious”. He pursed his lips, satisfied at the loophole abuse, and chuckled to himself.

At this, Gryffindor took his wand from the protective folds of his chest. “It is a true test of valour, to present your life for your family.” His voice was deep and booming and somehow less heroic than
Slytherin’s mellifluous tone.

“Hold your horses, Godric, really” interrupted Rowena Ravenclaw putting a delicate hand over Godric’s frankly very well developed biceps. The man was a hunk. “Let’s think this through. He can’t be making the vow off the top of his head! Phrasing is key in these cases.”

“And he would have to hold it forever. Even after whatever this is.” Added Helga Hufflepuff. She was sitting down on the pedestal, her heels clicking against it. She looked at Percy amiably. “There is some kind of ruckus going on, isn’t there? One doesn’t sacrifice his life for his family in peaceful times.”

“A war is starting” Percy admitted.

“That’s what I thought.”

They asked him some more questions and Slytherin came with the idea that the vow should specify the cause of death of the family member, so that they would be protected during the war but Percy wouldn’t have to kill himself when his parents died of old age which was obviously unavoidable and would rob him of many years. The point was to force his powers to give him the visions he needed, not to die young. Ravenclaw worried about the definition of family, but Percy didn’t mind much and they agreed that it would include whoever he considered part of it, regardless of actual blood relations.

It took fifteen minutes of heavy discussion until Ravenclaw was satisfied with the wording and Slytherin had exhausted all other considerations. Only then Percy could make the vow to himself with Gryffindor as his Bonder and Ravenclaw by his side, whispering in his ear the very specific and very well thought oath.

He had to leave quickly after that. His absence about to go noticed. It wasn’t until much later that night, when he was about to fall asleep in his tiny bachelor apartment in London that the realization came of what he had done. Not the vow, the vow was all right, perfect solution. Best idea he had had in ages. No, it was the fact that he had gone to the statues for their help, because as far as Percy knew, and he had read A History of Hogwarts twice, they usually didn’t do that. They were just statues and had never moved.

***

The war would be long and ugly.

Percy knew you shouldn’t make glorious last stands at the beginning of the war, they achieve nothing other than your death. A declaration of allegiance and undying loyalty, a flashing act of defiance, that was all very nice, and it was good for moral no doubt but it also painted a target on your back. And on your forehead. He would be playing the long game and that required more subtlety.

When the time came, and it would come, Percy would have to be in the right position to help his family. He had full intention of seeing them all come to the other side of the war alive. He would claw his way to a high place from which he could help them and he would cling there with all his might. It wouldn’t be easy to ascend and once there it wouldn’t be easy to hold his position. If their enemies didn’t realize, if he managed to conquer that place undetected, all the better. That meant starting his ascend before anyone thought of suspecting him.

To protect his position of power in the Ministry and to rise higher still, Percy had to perform some ugly tasks. Break his mother’s heart. Send that horrible letter to Ron, to the twins, to dear Ginny.
His brothers would forgive him, he thought, and his mother’s heart would mend itself.

***

Two nights after taking the vow Percy woke from a horrible dream. There were tears in his cheeks and his mouth was dry. All he remembered was the idea of a matched set broken, pulled apart forever.

He didn’t get any more sleep that night.

The dream came back once a week and every time Percy knew and didn’t know what it was about. He awoke in terror, knowing that something horrible would happen, he had no doubts about what. Yet it was too far away to know the details. He only had the feeling of stony dust and tears and snot in his face, and the ache in his throat from feeling his heart come up that way.

***

Three day’s before Christmas, as Percy was brushing his teeth preparing for bed, he was assaulted by the thought. Dark green and red and prickly like the needles of a pine tree.

_I won’t be alive for Christmas._

He didn’t go to bed. He realized that night that his decision carried some complications because he had such a _ridiculously large_ family. How come none of the statues had asked him about that? Four of his siblings were at Hogwarts with an insane witch and Charlie _worked_ with bloody _dragons._

(And yet he always felt that Charlie was the safest of them all. Charlie was extremely likeable, he had no doubt the dragons would protect him.)

Early the next morning he went to Gringotts. With big dark shadows under his eyes he requested some money from his accounts just so he could get a glimpse of Bill. He saw him through a half closed door, laughing with Fleur Delacour in what seemed to be the break room. When he heard that Percy was there Bill came to greet him, because Bill had always been so nice.

Percy was cold and standoffish as he repeated the bullshit speech he had been giving for weeks about choosing the right people. Inside, he could melt with relief because he saw that it was not him, it wouldn’t be Bill.

As he went to work, Percy saw Sturgis Podmore leaving the Ministry yawning and he was hit by the certainty that it was something to do with whatever little secret club Dumbledore was running.

(He did not agree with Fudge’s lunacy, and he thought Umbridge was dangerous, but he shared their belief that Dumbledore had a secret army at his command. Not of students, though, that’s where the Ministry was wrong).

That night, two days before Christmas and before Percy was due to die, he stayed in his office after hours. At seven he left his desk and started his slow patrol of the building.

He found his father by the entrance to the Hall of Prophecy and Percy had to smile at the irony. He waited in the shadows and although he could not stop the attack of the snake, he did enough to drive her away before the kill. As she left, Percy knocked a few wards with his wand raising the alarms. Soon a few Aurors (Shacklebot, who would have thought it? And Tonks, who was in the same year as Charlie) arrived quickly enough to save his father’s life.

Percy returned his Christmas present unopened and did not go to the hospital to visit his father. He
knew he was going to be all right.

It would hurt his family, though. His mother, specially, would suffer. But Percy still had those dreams where the matched set was broken. He knew nothing would hurt as much as that. Out of all of them it was the cruellest loss, a double one. He had seen his mother’s premature grey hair and one of the twins (which one? Even in his visions he couldn’t tell) drowning in sadness.

He had started this for his family. Only his family. But now Percy found himself secretly helping many other people in the understanding that every muggleborn and halfblood he helped could make a difference in the future. He did not trust Dumbledore’s Order and they had positioned themselves well enough in the Ministry that they didn’t need him. He didn’t work with them but he sent them a tip from time to time.

He signed as Galahad. He was pretty sure no one would get the joke.

He still saw nothing on the tea leaves and the crystal ball remained dark, but he got better. Now he looked in the mirror in the mornings and the mirror told him things, many of which didn’t have anything to do with him or his family at all.

By his calculations, he had saved eight lives already. His father’s and Bill’s, that horrible day when the deatheaters thought to try something in Gringotts, and that half-blood family of four and Kingsley Shacklebot and Alastor Moody.

All without the Ministry suspecting. No one suspected him. Not the Ministry nor the Order or his family. No one. He was the dull bookish Weasley, the one without a spark. No one looked beyond what they thought was his ambition to shine for once in his life by getting the approval of the Ministry of Magic. It was such a good legitimate motive, such an understandable reason, no one questioned it even if they didn’t approve his conduct.

He had started this for his family, but now Percy had the opportunity to give these two men not only their freedom but their lives. Men who, Percy knew, were innocent. Despite the Ministry’s assurances against Voldemort’s return somewhere in the Auror department there was a file on one Peter Pettigrew, suspected deatheater. More than one person knew of the innocence of Sirius Black, but his innocence was inconvenient. It was evidence of how badly they had handled things in the past.

Remus Lupin was guilty of course, but given the stories Percy had heard from his brothers, he thought he had been quite on the right. Percy disliked Harry for the trouble that followed him, but he thought that the kid was all right. Dreadful student all around, but a kind person.

He sighed.

This was not what he had planned, but since he was here, he might as well.

“Honestly, I don’t know what were you thinking, going around all this time out in the open, wandless.” Percy said. His voice was different now, less cold than when the other wizards were around. “It is a wonder you haven’t been captured earlier.”

“Can’t exactly enter Ollivander’s with this face, can I?” answered Sirius who, despite the gravity of the situation, could still put on one hell of a smouldering, roguish, smile. No one had warned Percy that this man would be so good looking. You would think that someone would tell him beforehand about the attractiveness of the prisoners if only to avoid any siren ploy.

Focus, Percy. “But you have some way to sneak unnoticed, don’t you?” He said. They must have, to
be able to elude arrest for so long. “I know the Ministry wanted to know if you have accessed your accounts, but Gringotts refused to share the information.”

“I am not telling you anything.”

Percy shrugged. “Fair enough.” He opened again the box of chocolate wands and took one, peeling a bit of the gold and silver paper before biting on the point. It was white chocolate, this one. Not his favourite but not bad either.

“Did you know that a wizard’s wand is only broken if they are expelled from Hogwarts?” Percy said in wonder of the, at times, absurd wizarding laws. “There are people who have actually casted unforgivable curses and their wands are kept intact. They used to be in the Auror Office during the last war, but some years after that they decided to move them to the Wizengamot” Percy stopped to swallow “and ended up in a drawer in the Administration Services.”

He stopped and looked at Sirius straight in the eyes. “Oh, so sorry. I haven’t offered you any. Would you like a wand?”

***

The hour had passed. The squad tasked with the transport of the prisoners had arrived only to discover their escape from the holding cell. The alarms were ringing and there was a flurry of wizards hurriedly locking all of the Ministry entrances.

Sirius watched this from the other side of the street, Remus leaning on his side. The hour had passed and it was enough to get outside the Ministry and now, in a second, apparate to Diagon Alley and the safe house.

The kid, well not a kid, probably the same age James and Lily had been when they became parents, although they had been kids, too, children all of them… He had bitten his lip and asked “Do you have somewhere to go?”

They had some ideas. Ideas that involved going right back to the haunted house and finding their children, although they weren’t about to say so.

Percy was shaking his head. Each shake liberated a curl from its hair gel prison. “Next week…Next week there will be dust and blood and the smell of leather. It is so big, it’s confusing, I can’t really see.” He pointed at Remus who had only just stopped bleeding. Sirius had relished melting the silver chains into a puddle in the floor. His very first act with his returned wand.

Percy went on. “This man is about to fall over, you need somewhere safe where he can heal and rest.”

Going back was right out, is what he was trying to say. Sirius knew Remus would fight it, but he also knew he wouldn’t fight it for long because they had punished him particularly cruelly. In real life it doesn’t matter how driven you are, if you are hurt you are incapacitated and you certainly can’t go fight anyone.

“Do you trust Dumbledore?” Percy asked tipping his head. A curl bounced on his forehead.

“I umh…” Did Sirius trust Dumbledore? Dumbledore? He was the greatest wizard alive, the man who defeated Grindelwald. The only one Voldemort ever feared and the one who was now trying to stop him. The mere mention of his name had been enough, once, for him to relinquish baby Harry and pass him to Hagrid’s arms.
“No” said Remus curtly. Ah, well, no then. Good man, but you probably couldn’t trust his judgment. He sent Harry to those muggles.

“See? I don’t either and I don’t know why.” Percy bit his lip and tapped his temple with his wand. Where did you go when you couldn’t trust Dumbledore?

He came with an answer.

He sworn them to secrecy, which was the least they could do, no trouble. Then he told them they could use the name Galahad, if asked, (that put the shadow of a smile in Remus’ eye for some reason). Percy had been using that name when he helped the Order and he thought… Yes, there were those who would help them. New members who could be convinced to keep it a secret from Dumbledore.

Then he casted *stupefy* on the ceiling to leave the trace on his wand and asked to get a punch and possibly a curse, too, if it wasn’t too much bother. He had a reputation to maintain.

“I don’t know how we can repay you” Remus had said, resting part of his weight against the wall.

“We don’t do these things expecting payment, do we?” answered Percy before smirking. “But I do have some suggestions. Keep an eye, well both eyes, on my brothers, please. They are a handful I know, keep them safe.”

“We will.”

“Oh, and if you find Dawlish on your way out, I would appreciate if you could murder him a little. I dislike him very much.”

“I will do my best” vowed Sirius. He would show that Dawlish man whoever he was.

Sirius felt terrible having to punch the poor kid on the face. He made sure the curse was one that could be removed easily and didn’t hurt too much.

They left and they did not open a path of fire and smoke, spreading terror around them, mostly because of the need of stealth. Still, Sirius liked to think that they did sow a bit of chaos for later. Make it clear to everyone that Percival Weasley could not have stopped them, so he should not be blamed for their escape. No one could have prevented it.

Particularly the Special Operator that attempted to cut their way. Sirius made a mental note to discuss it with someone because when he transformed the man into an octopus Sirius cackled. Cackling was never a good sign and especially not in his family.

(It was Dawlish, but he shouldn’t have laughed so much.)

It was starting to rain. Sirius linked arms with Remus and they apparated away.

***

The rain increased. One of those summer storms that are all thunder and intensity and really big drops, bigger that the stylized sharp raindrops of winter rain.

“Hello!” Sirius said when the door swung open. “I am the renowned murderer Sirius Black, no actual murders performed, and this is the infamous werewolf Remus Lupin, he doesn’t really eat children.”
“Gahggn!”

That was exactly the reaction such introduction deserved. Unfortunately, Remus was too busy trying not to pass out or vomit his intestines to handle the conversation.

“I am terribly sorry, I wouldn’t normally call without having been formally introduced to each other before, but we find ourselves in need of some urgent aiding and abetting.”

“Tell them about Galahad” whispered Remus in a single burst of breath. Breathing hurt, speaking hurt too. He might have a broken rib. No, he had at least one broken rib.

“Ah, yes, thank you Moony. A man operating under the name Galahad thought you could be of help. This has to be kept secret, even from Dumbledore.”

The befuddled young man stepped aside and waved them in immediately, which didn’t say anything good of his critical thinking. As soon as Remus got his wind back he would be telling them of the importance of checking for polyjuice and not inviting strangers inside. He would let it go for now because he couldn’t think of any good reason why someone would polyjuice as them, but it was the principle of the thing. They had to learn some caution.

For now he let himself be led to the apartment upstairs where he feebly fought against laying down because he didn’t want to bleed all over their sofa. He lost.

He may or may not had passed out. The world became like a chalk picture, shaky and dusty and undefined, and Remus felt himself drifting.

Well, he had been hit with three stunning spells.

But, unlike the other time, that horrible, horrible, night and the cruel morning that followed, Remus was calm. He might had been badly injured but that was nothing compared to the agony of not knowing what happened to your child. He didn’t know what had happened to Harry specifically, but in general terms he knew he would be all right. And Draco, too. Draco wasn’t his child, but he was becoming something like a nephew, someone he also cared about. They hadn’t been captured with them and they were smart and brave and they would be all right.

“I hope they eat their greens” mumbled Remus, who had been accused multiple times by The Prophet of feeding on young hearts.

“My word, Moony, what a mother hen you are. I am sure they will feel guilty enough to eat the occasional green bean, don’t you fret.”

“… vitamins…”

And then he definitely passed out.

***

The Evening Prophet broke the news of the second escape of Remus Lupin and Sirius Black just a few hours after they had joyously announced their arrest. The paper was obviously unsure on who to blame and what to make of it, since to exculpate Fudge’s administration they would have to paint the fugitives as really powerful wizards and that went against their editorial line of no threats whatsoever. But to say they were harmless meant that their breakout answered to incompetency and they already excused too much on any given day. For this reason, the report was a disastrous and convoluted story full of random details. The photo on the front page was of a shaken Percy Weasley with a bruised nose exiting the building. Some editor had decided against running the arrest photos again.
Better not to give an image of exactly the kind of men who had escaped.

It was certainly the kind of news the wizarding community didn’t know how to take. And this was after months of dark-lord-returns denials, undeserved Ministry praise and scandalized shock at the events in Hogwarts. People simply didn’t know if this was good or bad or something to worry about.

Others did. The two boys kneeling on the library floor, legs shaking too much to hold them, they knew to laugh and cry in relief and perhaps they jumped in surprise when their joy magically turned on the old gramophone that hadn’t been used in more than a decade, and they laughed and laughed again even if there were tears.

The Hogwarts professor put the bottle of wine down and after careful consideration vanished it all together. He decided from now on he would give himself a period of grace before worrying because of any news. No news would be consumed fresh, not when he had obviously attached himself to these remarkable people who kept cheating destiny.

“GEOOOOORGE” called a voice. “Come quickly! Something wonderful has happened.”

Two other boys, slightly older but still too young and innocent for what was to come, two boys born with mirth in their lips, dissolved in rivers of laughter and demanded to know who had thrown the punch. They kissed the hand that had hit their brother and made a whole show over how it had been due for a very long time now.

Sirius had to bite his tongue.

But other than a tragic ignorance of their brother’s nature, ignorance that worked to his favour in any case, the twins were very good company. They welcomed them in, fed them, helped Sirius look at Remus’ wounds, and as predicted they showed no scruples whatsoever at keeping it a secret from everyone. Yes, they had joined the Order, but the Order hadn’t given them the thousand galleons to start their business and allow them to move out of home at the end of the course. Harry did. So of course Harry took precedence in their loyalties.

Just as Sirius had said, it was those damned Potters with their kindness and their adopting people.

***

Nobody tells you that when you are on an adventure or during a war, there is quite a lot of downtime. There had been a daring escape, there had been the run seeking refuge. Now there was dinner and the less heroic “here, I will show you the bathroom. Where do me keep the extra towels?” and “You can take my bed, we are used to sharing, it is no trouble” and just people walking around in their socks. There is nothing as removed from the adventure ideal as someone in their socks and underwear bending down to look for the spare blankets and a toothbrush.

Then came the morning and Remus waking up and announcing his intention to go look for Harry only to become dizzy as soon as he gave two steps. There was breakfast and more giggles over Percy’s misfortunes and then there was a shop to open and a world that kept moving.

At lunch time Fred, probably Fred in any case, froze with a forkful of salad in mid air. (Sirius had no idea how Remus had done it, but he was certain that they had not been eating any kind of leafy greens before). Rather than a frown Fred had a blank expression as if his brain couldn’t be bothered to send a signal to his facial muscles, too busy with mulling over whatever he was thinking.

“Moony” he said at last putting the fork down on his plate. The lettuce leaf fell and promptly disappeared under the small mountain of chips. “He calls you Moony.”
“For some reason, someone thought Wolfman was not a good nickname” said Sirius, who was not feeling bitter at all that the world had not recognized his hilarity.

Remus put his fork down and gave them a really tired look. He was looking tired, pale and with shadows under his eyes. But this was a different kind of tiredness all together, not one that had to do with his beaten body.

“Yes, Moony. Because of the moon.”

“Because he is a soppy hearted, mushy, fluffy thing. Stop kicking me, if Wolfman is ‘too aggressive’ then you get the sentimental nickname you very well deserve, sir.”

“I did not say aggressive, I said blatant to the point of criminally stupid.”

“Oh. My. God.” That was George, who had just arrived to the same conclusion than his brother through a different mental path.

“Any relation to Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs, by any chance?” asked Fred leaning forward. George had put his hand over his heart and awaited anxiously the answer.

There were three second of silence. Three seconds in which a legendary battle of wits unfolded, to be won by Remus.

“Yes, but I must say that there was a typo.” He spoke quickly, the words running in his mouth. “It is not Padfoot but Bad foot, you see, Sirius here had an incident in the Prefect’s bath-aarg.”

Occasionally, friends are allowed to choke friends so they will stop talking.

***

The problem with going into hiding is that soon it becomes a kind of torment.

The people hiding you are now burdened with keeping a secret, with hosting someone in their home and feeding them without anyone suspecting anything. It is tiring and stressful and scary, and still many people through history have done it because they understood they were saving a life.

The people hiding, that’s not easy either. Safety doesn’t bring peace of mind. There is that constant anxiety, that fear that you will be found or that your friend will go out and won’t return. Even if you somehow manage to deal with all that, there is the hiding itself which is too similar to imprisonment. Long hours locked in a room that you can’t leave and where you can’t make any noise. You are useless, sitting there and doing nothing while your friend risks their life, and it eats you. Inaction is a kind of poison.

As chance would have it, this would not be the case. The twins, it turned out, were great admirers of the four pranksters known as the Marauders.

(“I TOLD YOU people called us that. He said only we used it, but obviously MORE PEOPLE did.”)

“As much as it pains me to say it, I will admit you were right.”)

So of course Fred and George had to show them their shop once it was closed and Verity had left, and the workshop where they manufactured most of their stuff. There was praising of past and present pranksters and admiring of their inventions and some suggestions.

And then it came.
“We have been thinking of making a line of safety products” explained Fred.

“Because of the last DADA teacher” George added. “People learned nothing. We know nothing.”

“Can’t protect ourselves.”

“I mean, we could, we played Beaters.”

“But as curriculum goes, we can’t.”

“And other people can’t.”

“Because they weren’t Beaters.”

This made perfect sense. There were at least two generations that barely got any Defence Against the Dark Arts training, Remus knew this to be true.

“I mean, I’m confident on ourselves. We grew up in a big family.”

“Uh-hu. The weak don’t survive.”

“But most people don’t have the benefit of our upbringing.”

And so they bypassed the usual gloom and existential questioning that came with hiding. A table was cleared and they erected a partition between storeroom and workshop so Sirius and Remus could work in there without Verity discovering them. There would be no poisonous inaction and the secret would be no burden at all, not when they clicked so well together.

***

“Ooh, Minerva! I was looking for you.”

Dear Merlin, give me patience.

“Today, as I was mending my socks I was struck by a feeling of dread. I turned at once to the cards, Minerva, the cards were calling to me to deliver you a message.”

Why must this woman insist on talking to me? You save them once from being kicked out to the streets and now they won’t leave you alone.

“Four times I drew The Fool from the deck.”

“Remarkable. I have no doubt they were calling you, Sybil.”

“Minerva, you must listen! The forces of chaos have come to gurgle and bubble together!”

“If you are feeling gassy, I am sure Madam Pomfrey can offer you something”.
The prophecy said: _Next week there will be dust and blood and the smell of leather._

On Monday evening seven deatheaters broke in the Ministry and the Department of Mysteries. They were stopped at the doors of the Hall of Prophecies by a small number of wizards, all Order-related.

Someone (Moody) brought down the doors and part of the ceiling to close the access to the prophecies. Maybe this was the dust. It certainly made things dirty.

It only occurred to them then that a prophecy could only be retrieved by those concerned by it. Since Harry Potter had made himself quite inconveniently scarce, he could not be deceived nor manipulated in to doing that favour.

The Dark Lord had to come himself.

There was just a short moment while they fought the deatheaters to let the fear brought by that realization sink its teeth in the tender flesh of their necks. Just a moment and then Voldemort himself was there and Nymphadora Tonks was on the floor, dying.

She survived. For some unfathomable reason he had not casted _Avada Kedrava_. For the first three days, however, she wished she had died. She spent a whole week bleeding out of every orifice of her body. The healers worried that in the event that she lived she might not be able to conceive any children and Tonks was coughing too much blood to explain to them that, really, that was not a concern of hers at the moment. But that would be on Friday, when Emmeline Vance would hit the mediwizard with her bag and tell them to just cure her already, forget about conception.

For now, she lay on the floor watching her blood spread over the black marble.

Oh, how Bellatrix laughed. Perhaps the curse had been casted for her, so she could see her mudblood cousin purified.

She didn’t laugh for long. Kingsley Shackeblot kept her busy.

They were outnumbered, but Moody had made enough noise that other wizards were coming. Maximinus Minchell was turned into a bearded lizard as soon as set a foot in the hall. Gallantina Cortazar managed to successfully stupefy Rodolphus Lestrange and she was so surprised by it that she could not stop the curse that hit her soon after.

Voldemort advanced through the fighting wizards, the hem of his robe wet with blood. The fallen mortar and stone of the hall started to shake as he got closer to the Hall of Prophecies and its blocked entrance.

No.

He would not get there. He would not take the prophecy. His scream, when he realized it, was enough to turn the hair of the closets wizards white. A woman fainted, with a small trickle of blood coming from her ears.

Dumbledore had come.
So had many other people, including Fudge who could no longer deny the undeniable. But in that moment nobody cared about Fudge, or Umbridge or Dawlish, although Dawlish was a Special Operator so if he could see to join the fight, that would be welcomed.

People only cared about Dumbledore’s arrival. He was the only one the Dark Lord ever feared. The one who could chase the monster out.

The duel was nasty and took longer than anyone expected.

They evacuated the room. Order and Ministry and deatheaters all mixed together while they fled. The blood on the floor was rising, turned into a river that would drown them all. It was well above waist height when the last witch exited.

They couldn’t see Dumbledore.

Then the blood rose higher making a giant wave that took the form of an eagle that fell over Voldemort. But as the claws were about to tear him apart the eagle dissolved into a thousand beetles that scattered around the room.

Voldemort casted three curses in quick succession and then when Dumbledore was half turned, *Avada Kedavra*. Dumbledore avoided all of them and even managed to send one of the curses, a nasty thing of a purple so dark it was almost black, back to him.

As they fought, they moved.

Little by little, away from the prophecies and back to the Atrium. Fighting for every step.

Dumbledore made a rope of golden light that turned into a net and then into a cage surrounding Voldemort. One touch with Voldemort’s wand, that feared bonewhite wand, and the bars broke as if they were simply made of caramel. Hundredths of crystal shards raining on the corridor.

Voldemort sent a wind, a wind strong and sharp that would shave away the flesh of your bones. There was more running. A few deatheaters abandoned the place and the rest were quickly arrested.

The wind parted around Dumbledore. All he lost was a thread from his sleeve and a few errant hairs from his beard. As soon as the wind abated a fire emerged from Dumbledore’s wand. The fire took the shape of a lion, a winged lion that ran towards Voldemort. It was a ruse, however, just a distraction so he could attack the very ground where Voldemort was standing, the hard stone transforming and rising as if it to engulf him.

But Voldemort noticed. He chose and he chose well. The fire lion got him, three slashes of his claws before disappearing, but he stopped the creeping hand of stone that would have crushed him. Voldemort had never been one for subtlety. He turned the moving stone into a single giant boulder and threw it at Dumbledore at full speed.

Dumbledore made a whip like movement and slashed the stone, cutting it as if it were as soft as butter. It fell to the floor in little pieces, the edges hot and glowing white. And then he jumped and turned to avoid a thin green line Voldemort had sent. Dumbledore casted three white balls that soon became red and did nothing but took the green line with them. Voldemort made a black smoke that whispered terrors, Dumbledore just managed to dispel it when it was almost swallowing him whole.

There was a sand storm and nobody knew who had created it or who changed it into fire. There was a giant snake, biting and spitting venom, and three kestrels fighting it. At some point the whole Atrium was full of white, just white, and it was suffocating. There were scorpions with glossy shells crawling down the walls. For some reason, the women and *only* the women would remember them
clearly, more than anything else.

There was a silence, the feeling of an ancient hungry presence. It was dispelled by the ring of a silver bell.

There was a curse in an old tongue. Words that brought madness and tears and made people fall to their knees except for the truly innocent and for those born in the night between April and May.

Nobody spoke of the moment when everything was covered with sore boils.

And then… Voldemort left.

There was a horrified silence at the wreckage of the Ministry. Perhaps the dust meant this.

Dumbledore left soon after.

People wouldn’t know, couldn’t know, that there had been no victory today. Only the two men, Voldemort and Dumbledore, only the two of them and their closest lieutenants on which they chose to confide would know that neither had come unscathed. That they had both lost that day.

Fudge’s deposition was immediate and flashing. Perhaps the dust meant this. His downfall was so quick people could only see the fluttering dust left behind.

Rufus Scrimgeour was next. Head of the Auror Office, he had organized the evacuation and stood behind to protect the Ministry wizards when the devouring wind came. He was a man like an old lion. The old hard lion that has returned from many hunts where he was both prey and hunter. He wore a leather coat and smelled like oil and everything masculine. He had duelled and killed Augustus Rockwood, saved many lives when he took that one.

There was no doubt the prophecy meant him.

***

It was, indeed, a confusing week.

Harry and Draco spent most of their time in the library because that’s where Kreacher brought the post. They tried hanging around the entrance but there was a cold draft, ugly décor, and the portrait of Walburga Black. Besides Kreacher was adamant on following the traditions of the house and as soon as he got the paper he apparated to the library because he could not tolerate the idea of handing it in the entrance hall.

Together they read of Sirius and Remus’ escape, together they read of the battle in the Department of Mysteries and the terrified acceptance that yes, You-Know-Who had returned. They read of Fudge’s resigning before his official deposition and of Scrimgeour taking his place.

They did little else for the first few days. This house felt more haunted than the other one. It, she, had accepted them but they were not welcome and she refused to change to accommodate them.

Still, they carved out a life from the hostile, hard, tight, body of the house. The library became theirs. It was the place where they got the news, where they learned that the closest they had ever had to proper parents had escaped, had survived. That room was theirs.

(They had been busy crying and laughing in each other arms at the time and so they missed the very rare vision of a boggart in its natural state crawling from under the armchair and hurriedly leaving the room to go hide in the master bedroom).
They spent there the first night, laying together on the rug and sharing the cushions and blankets from the armchairs. Both of them pressed together like they had been during the mad ritual in the kitchen. Pressed together in the same way of the sculptures or skeletons unearthed by archaeologist. A pose they could hold for centuries while the outside world went down its mad way and their bones turned to stone. There was something about comfort and protection there, in the small circle they were making with their bodies.

It would take them days to find and clear the bedrooms in the third floor, the ones that belonged to Sirius and Regulus. Harry took the latter. He intuitively understood that Draco would prefer Sirius’ even with all the Gryffindor décor. And Harry really didn’t mind the other bedroom. Regulus seemed to had been a very introspective and intellectual young man. His room was full of interesting books about foreign magic.

Despite having two bedrooms they still slept together many times, just as they had that first night. Maybe through the night or maybe an exhausted nap during the day. Nothing more than that, just sleep, heads close and arms around each other. Just the comfort of another warm body, another breath, another heartbeat besides your own in the big empty house.

Harry had nightmares, but less so when he could press his face to Draco’s chest. Draco’s pulse was quick and lively and not at all like the relaxing repetitive beat that supposedly will make you slow down and fall asleep. But it wasn’t about falling asleep, Harry could fall asleep. It was about having a proof of life near and not waking sweating with terror from a nightmare about illness and death, so much death, extending like a plague and covering everything until there was only Harry all alone in a deserted and blackened world. Harry found himself seeking refuge in Draco’s bed after waking from those nightmares.

Draco, on the other hand, never had nightmares; but then again he couldn’t fall asleep to begin with. When he found himself so exhausted that he could cry and still was unable to sleep he went to Harry because something in the rhythm of his breath and the warmth of his body and maybe even the smell of his skin and his hair could make Draco fall asleep right away. Something about Harry’s presence allowed him to slow down and relax.

They never had this trouble sleeping in the haunted house, even when the poltergeist spooked them. But there was no point thinking about that. It was not about what happened then it was about now and the problems they faced, and this was one of the easy ones to solve.

***

While the rest of the wizarding world was frozen in a terrified stupor, these were long days full or hard work for Harry and Draco. No one, not even them, had realized the potential that hid in the space between them. No one had truly seen how well they fitted together. There was that core of resolution and strength inside Harry, that heart of diamond that helped him survive, unbent and unbroken. While Draco… Draco was taken by the fire of its namesake. Draco was coming to that stage where he could not be hurt, only killed, because otherwise he would bounce back of everything with redoubled energy and rage.

What a marvellous thing that they had both known kindness, that the last few months they had someone to show them love. It would be a terrible thing if they were to grow cold hearts, a terrible thing indeed.

For them, but mostly for the world.

The house didn’t want them and didn’t want to change, but it had nothing to do against them. Resistance was futile. They worked diligently, fuelled by Kreacher’s food and the diamond and the
fire. They removed the dust, and the spiders, and the doxies. They opened the back door, that little, unassuming, door with cracking white pain, and held it open with a bucket full of water for a whole hour to air the house. Harry went room by room during that hour saying that the door was open and the creatures were invited to leave.

Most didn’t, but the boggart that used to live in the library did, followed by the ghoul under the stairs. He had seen them, gotten a taste of them. Better move if you wanted to survive.

They removed the remaining doxies. A nether attempted to eat Draco and Harry hit it with an iron pan (if you can’t or won’t cast spirintallus, iron is fine). He hit him so hard that the ring was heard through the whole house and the nether was reduced to a gooey stain in the carpet that they later had to scrape off.

It was subtle, but Kreacher became a bit more accommodating after that.

They were cautious and did not to do any magic. Wizarding house or not, it was possible that the Trace would be activated. Harry was confident that he would manage to fool any wizard from the Ministry now that he was not consumed by grief, but probably no more than once. Someone ought to find it funny if they kept getting traces of underage magic from the same address.

While Harry cleaned as much as he could, Draco was tasked with identifying every cursed or dangerous object in the house, mostly because he had seen plenty of similar ones in Malfoy Manor. Kreacher provided a pair of dragon hide gloves and Draco would very carefully take each object and place it in a trunk, to be stored in the attic. Since he was so careful about wrapping them and even wrote a list with a description, Kreacher didn’t try to steal them back.

It felt wrong, making Kreacher help with this. It was enough that he cooked for them. The poor elf wasn’t completely here and they weren’t about to put more strain on him. The prohibition of speaking a word about them was doing enough on his fragile mental state, especially because some of the portraits kept asking what was going on, it is dark and we can hear movements.

So they saved the magic be it human or elvish for emergencies and did everything by hand. The cleaning and dusting and removal of doxies (they were everywhere, you never finished taking the doxies out), the carving of a home. Years later Draco would have a flashback to this time, to himself in an old t-shirt, slightly sweaty and dishevelled, dragging down the stairs the corpse of an acromantula the size of a dog. Years later Draco would have to sit down and have a small freak out at the nonchalance with which he had hunted and killed and disposed of the monster, shoving it in the dumpster at the end of the street because their own garbage was full.

***

It was not agoraphobia, all right? It was not. It was just a sudden fear of leaving the house. The trips to the dumpster were fine, if done quickly early in the morning or evening, but it was impossible to give one single step beyond that.

The house was safe. It was horrible but it was safe. Beyond that was Voldemort, a Voldemort who now dared to show his face in public; and the Ministry of Magic which new Minister or not at the head was still a horrible institution; and Dumbledore and the people of Hogwarts who were not bad but could be terribly hurtful nevertheless even if it wasn’t their intention. And above all of them there was London itself. As it often happens with big cities, old cities, they have a life and a character of their own. Not necessarily evil, but hard and overwhelming. Walking through this kind of cities when you are not ready is like navigating a dark sea without compass or stars.

There was a letter sitting in the escritoire in the library. It was a very good letter, written carefully
after many attempts and with both of them going over it to make sure they didn’t let slip anything compromising. It was an excellent letter to send to Severus or to Sirius and Remus and let them know that they were all right in a safe place and they could come pick them up whenever.

It was a good letter. Well coded. They were pretty sure that if someone intercepted it they wouldn’t be able to figure out its meaning. But still they didn’t dare send it. Not to Severus, certainly, when the mere fact that he was receiving a letter from Harry would be compromising enough. Sirius and Remus then. Only it meant stepping out of the house, and the familiar street, and going into London and its maze of streets and people and finding a wizarding pub and going in there with a disguise and asking for an owl and then waiting, waiting for a response.

Harry had read the *Oddisey* when he was a child and later he had asked Severus to get him a proper copy, not one of those versions adapted for children, but a translation of the original poem. It is not an easy text to read, the flow of the names and the invocations and the ideas feel clunky when it is not in the original Greek, but despite this difficulty Harry had liked it better.

You see, in the version they give to children Ulises jumps from adventure to adventure before finally arriving to Ithaca and Penelope. It is an adventure book and not a very good one given how many sailors keep drowning and getting eaten. It is, in fact, a horrible adventure book for children and Harry had been a bit concerned that Ulises didn’t show more regard for the sailors.

The poem though, the poem opens with Ithaca and the family waiting and then goes to a tired Ulises who has been trying to get back for a decade. It is not an adventure story. It is the story of someone who is close to broken, languishing on an island accompanied by someone they abhor but too tired to start the trip again. Too tired to face the monsters and navigate the sea with only the stars as a guide.

They hated the house. A house they could swear was made from the black exoskeleton of a scarab and a scorpion. But right now, even if Harry had been shaken from his stupor and they had trampled their grief to the ground, they were both too tired, too tired to sail around London and steer away from Voldemort and the Ministry and the siren song of the Order.

They didn’t send the letter. They repeated to themselves that Remus had made them promise that they would take care of each other and stay safe and not take any risks. Going out and sending the letter was a big risk. Perhaps they would have still attempted it had it been just a risk to themselves. But it could also mean a risk to Sirius and Remus if they accidentally revealed where they were hiding and they could not risk they recently gained freedom.

They didn’t like it, but they were both very well used to accepting things they didn’t like. If there was any frustration over it they could turn it against the house that was both a hated place and a fortress against the outside world.

***

Molly Weasley did not approve of her twins sons’ business adventure, but there was little she could do about it. What she could do, however, was to request her sons’ presence every Sunday to have lunch at the Burrow with the rest of the family.

… And the Order members that were still using the place as base of operations, of course. The world wasn’t going to end if you didn’t sat down to Molly’s table. Now, Shacklebot. Sit down now. Did you wash your hands? Yes, Moody, I know there was a battle, but that was on Monday, so sit down and eat a meal like normal people do.

Thanks to these meals the twins were able to report back that not only the Ministry had no idea that Harry Potter had been five minutes away from them, but neither did the Order. Although of course
the Order always suspected that Lupin and Black couldn’t be very far away from Harry and they had investigated the area thoroughly.

“What did they find?” asked Sirius anxiously. Remus took things with more restraint. He had been right twice already with Harry.

“That someone in the Order has a tattoo in their bum” said George, grinning. “Sadly, Tonks refused to tell us who. We think Moody.”

“Apparently there is a spirit living there who doesn’t take well to visitors.”

So they knew nothing, other than a general suspicion that Harry had not died in the broom accident. Severus, on the rare occasions he came to the Burrow to report, could confirm the same for his part. Voldemort, Dumbledore, and the Ministry all thought Harry had gone into hiding but there was no agreement over who was hiding him. Since the two most obvious suspects had been captured and then released sans Harry, people were at a loss about where to look next.

There was also the other matter. They had all been pretty isolated in the haunted house. They got news from Severus and what little they overheard at the pub, so they knew what was happening in general terms. But they weren’t in a position to notice the conspicuous absence of news relating to Draco Malfoy.

There were reports of sightings of Harry Potter every week because most people thought, or hoped, that Harry Potter was alive. However there was no news whatsoever about Draco Malfoy because everybody believed that he had been killed. It was, in fact, the only point of contention for the twins who had been really accommodating about keeping everything else secret. This was the only thing they wish they could broadcast to everyone. The rumour mill at Hogwarts already said they shouldn’t worry about Harry so it was okay to keep quiet. (Apparently the muggleborns saw something the rest didn’t in the paper, something that the Order, Voldemort and the Ministry couldn’t see), and keeping Remus and Sirius’ presence a secret was no trouble. But Draco… Draco had just vanished after facing his father and showing him how far away from the wizarding superiority bullshit he was willing to go. Draco the pureblooded son of a death eater had broken his wand.

They had taken the pieces of his wand. The children did. Lucius Malfoy just stepped over them as he ran after his son with his wand raised. The next weekend Honeydukes had bags of broken chocolate wands, (the ones they usually sold at a discount because they were broken beyond repair, shards of hard chocolate and biscuit for the most part) advertised in the storefront as Dragon’s pieces. People hadn’t known if it was a tribute or tasteless. It didn’t matter much because the shop suddenly closed for three days and after it reopened the wands were gone and the owner had a haunted look and bruises he was ineffectually trying to cover.

And The Prophet made no mention of Draco whatsoever, even when they were still reporting on the riots of Hogwarts.

To this day the twins were still in communication with Blaise Zabini, because they wanted to do something, their own tribute, but had no idea what Draco liked or how he was. They had the fake wands that turned into a rubber chicken or a fish and they could make them so that they broke and repaired themselves, but it felt hollow. Draco’s act hadn’t been a joke. Draco’s act was the reason why a significant number of Slytherin students were not living in their families’ homes at the moment.

(Not to worry, the Interhouse Solidary party worked holidays and summers. All students had been relocated. Mostly to Ms Zabini’s house, who thought it all hilarious. Her little boy, not sixteen yet and already bringing his own seraglio home).
Remus had learned from a young age to always count the time and yet he had never been very good about it. Lily had told him once, when they were out of Hogwarts, that it happened to girls too. Every month the same story and still every month took you by surprise. Remus had refrained from pointing the obvious difference between ruining a pair of cute panties and becoming a murderous monster because he didn’t want to set up that joke.

(Someone would say it, he just knew someone would say girls became monsters too. And Lily didn’t throw curses around but she would poison you and sit down to watch. Ask Walden).

He counted the days now, and knew he had three weeks and two days to his next transformation. Twenty two days to find a place and make it secure.

Or fifteen days to prepare the Wolfsbane.

The Wolfsbane would make everything easier. They wouldn’t have to find a secure and sturdy place nor leave the house. He could simply transform upstairs. He wouldn’t even need Padfoot’s company although it would be welcome.

The twins looked at the recipe. Three pages long and full of steps. They had identical expressions of pain, one hand on their hair and the other on the table.

“We were never that good in Potions to begin with.”

“Skiving Snackbox are a success, but mostly because we always take careful notes of our failures. We were going for a potion that would change your hair colour.”

Skiving Snackboxes were the candy that if consumed would make you sick enough to skip class. You would puke and develop nosebleeds and rashes, but your hair would certainly remain unchanged.

Still, for some reason they were willing to brew the potion themselves and risk the threat posed by an intelligent feral werewolf in their apartment if it went wrong, rather than going for Remus’ perfectly sensible suggestion of an alternative solution. Sirius took their side, because Sirius had lost all sense of personal danger sometime in his third year of Hogwarts.

Since Remus was the only mature and reasonable person here (just like in school, really) he took the matter in his own hands. He nicked some of the official stationery and forged a letter in the twin’s names.

Mature and reasonable, yes. Stickler for the rules, no. Don’t get those mixed up. It takes a lot of maturity to realize a rule is stupid and that you shouldn’t feel bad for breaking it.

What.

That was the central thought in Severus’ heavily occluded mind as the owl delivered the garishly purple envelope. Thank Merlin it was still the last few days of August and he was in Spinner’s End. Alone, too, and hadn’t he dodged a bullet when His Darkness made some noises about Pettigrew going there to assist Severus. That had been before the debacle in the Ministry and now Pettigrew had others matters to attend.
Dear Professor Snape,

Severus immediately dropped the letter and went to find some general antidote to wash his fingers. He read the rest without touching it, bending over in his living room and holding to his face a handkerchief soaked in antidote.

We are writing to humbly request your advice on a potion problem we have encountered here at Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. We must admit that our knowledge of potions is deficient, despite having enjoyed your excellent lessons in Hogwarts. Although we have thoroughly explored the matter on our own, we have come to the conclusion that no one could direct and advice us better than yourself. Therefore, we respectfully beg for your assistance in this endeavour.

Once again, the only thought in Severus’ mind was a very disturbed What.

We are uncertain of our ability to accurately expose in writing the trouble we are finding, but nevertheless we will attempt to do so. The matter seems to be a deficiency in the quality of freshly brewed potions when apparating with them. Our venture is one that, we believe, requires extended discussion. As such, we would be most grateful if you could see to arrange for a meeting in person.

Hoping to hear from you soon, we remain at your service.

Mister F. Weasley

Mister G. Weasley

Severus blinked quickly a few times.

So not what, but who. Oh, clever, clever, man.

***

Sirius raised his head and stood immobile, like a hunting dog, staring at the door. The twins also looked up. Something wrong, something wicked, was in the shop.

Fear, it was the sound of fear that had alerted them. Throats closing, unrequested excuses mumbled, feet shuffling to the door hoping no one would notice. In a matter of seconds the shop went from packed to just a few stragglers hiding in the muggle magic section.

George came out of the workshop to find Verity ducking under the till. She did whisper that the trouble was coming from the Wonder Witch section, but she didn’t offer any other help beyond that.

Severus Snape was there. His black figure offering a stark contrast against all the vibrant pink of the packaging. He was staring impassibly at the bubbling melting mess of what had been a rather nice stand with love potions.
“Oi! That’s our merchandise you are destroying” said George, who was a Gryffindor and also out of school. *You are out of school. Out. He can’t give you detention, don’t listen if he says he can because he can not.*

Snape’s wand was still pointing at the remnants of the stand. The pink wrappers burning with blue flames. “So you admit being responsible for this?”

What little brave souls had remained in the shop after his entrance dropped their wares and left hurriedly as Snape began to recite his famous speech about Consent and the Responsibility of the Potioner. This, while odd, was perfectly in character as any Slytherin could tell you. Everyone was familiar with the speech, which he gave al the end of the year of studies. Officially intended for the first years that were about to enter puberty, but everyone else was supposed to stay and listen as a refreshment. There was a pop quiz after, to ensure comprehension. When McNair was on his fifth year, Severus made him write ten feet of scroll on the subject and then read it in the middle of the common room. No Slytherin would be surprised, precisely, that he chose to terrorize the Weasley shop.

The speech ended. The potions had solidified into a glassy mass that would take forever to remove from the floor, even with *Evanesco.*

“Now show me the rest Weasley.”

“But…”

“No student of mine will brew or provide this kind of potion. Show. Me. The. Rest.”

***

“Dammit, George! You coward”.

“Snnivesape.” Said Sirius who was honestly trying to kick the habit of calling him Snivellus but could make no promises if he was unprepared. Besides, the bastard had a very alliterative name.

Snape had his wand arm extended and his eyes were moving over the room and the supplies in a precise and exact manner, like the hawk looking from the clouds for the snake it will soon devour.

“Ah, Severus, you are here! I thought I heard you make an entrance” Remus said as he slowly made his way down the stairs and to the workroom. “So good to see you. Will you please stop terrorizing the twins? They had very gallantly agreed to host us.”

Severus was pointing at a package with his wand and it was starting to smoke. He looked very pleased. At Remus’ arrival however he agreed to drop the matter for the time being to talk business instead. Well, he and Remus talked business. The twins merely stood on the side trying to deal with the shock with varied success. They knew Severus was working for the Order, but this? They hadn’t expected this surprise. What did this mean?

The end result was that they would stay there and Remus would have his Wolfsbane. Even if Severus couldn’t risk coming to the shop every month, they quickly devised a system so he could drop it somewhere and one of the twins could get it.

And yes, goblin made glass, essential to maintain a potion’s properties when apparating.

There was however a feeling of something unfinished. Sirius got the impression that there was something that was not done or said. Something big and unacknowledged sitting between Remus and Snape.
There are things you do at age twenty you don’t do at thirty six. Go out without a jacket, drink all night, risk your cover and your life to get five quality minutes with your boyfriend.

So of course neither of them stepped outside, to the alley. Of course they focused on the task at hand and the war that was coming, that was already here at the door. Of course they didn’t risk everything for five minutes of snogging.

But that didn’t mean they didn’t want to.

The tragedy, however, wasn’t that they didn’t get five minutes to themselves. The tragedy was that they didn’t even have the opportunity to talk, to know if the other… It had all been blurry and undefined, before. Were they perhaps presuming too much about what they had? Had the arrest and Azkaban and time dispelled it, like opening a window in a room full of smoke?

(It hadn’t, of course it hadn’t. But they didn’t know. Remus suspected, because Severus was hopelessly romantic, and caring and stupidly self-sacrificing and he had dropped everything to come give him a potion. But still, a few minutes of clear, open, conversation would be welcome because neither of them knew if the other blamed them for what had happened.)

Voldemort wanted two things: Harry Potter’s death (and Severus couldn’t help but wonder at the phrasing, he wanted his death not to kill him himself) and Albus Dumbledore’s death.

Severus was in the perfect position to bring the second one.

To his surprise, Dumbledore called him for a private meeting. Just the two of them and no other Order member, and revealed he wanted the exact same thing.

The bloody same two things.

Albus Percival Wulfric Sodding Bastard Dumbledore wanted Harry’s death and his own.

“Have you perchance been confounded?” Severus asked, quite reasonably he thought.

Dumbledore was quite sure he was not. Dumbledore was very clever. Dumbledore had a brilliant plan that he now chose to share with Severus and he would never know how close he came to being murdered right there and then.

(Severus had had that spot to hide a body since Quirrell, it was a pity that it was still unused).

Because here was the thing, Harry was so obviously an accidental horcrux, and yes it was very sad, but he would have to die for Voldemort to be defeated. Preferably willingly. Not to worry, he had made sure to win the boy’s love and trust. He would do it. Harry would sacrifice himself for the wizarding world.

Severus stared. His mind was overtaken by images of a burned and blackened land in which Harry didn’t live, and then by the nine years of sunshine they had had at the cottage. They had had a good decade sans Voldemort. Could they not return him to that state of half life? Could they not make that the penalty for his crimes while Harry went on to live happily?

He could not utter a single word for fear of what he would say.
All Severus could think was that Remus would tear Dumbledore’s and anyone’s throat apart, and he wouldn’t even have to be transformed.

Then came the next big reveal. Dumbledore wouldn’t be around to tell Harry that he had to die, no, that task would be deferred to others. He was preparing his friends to learn about horcruxes, so they could relay the information (Harry, of course, wouldn’t question his friends) and, at the right time and not a minute earlier, Harry would know his duty and he would perform his sacrifice.

But Dumbledore wouldn’t get to see it.

“I am growing old, my friend” he said. “I paid a high price on that duel, one from which I won’t recover. My end approaches and I have accepted it. Only one thing remains, the power to bring my end in a certain way.”

Dumbledore understood that if he were to die alone or in another duel, the hit to the morale of the wizarding world would be immense. If he were to fight Voldemort again and be defeated, as he was sure would happen, people would lose all hope. They couldn’t have that.

“You might have been sorted in Slytherin, after all” Severus said at last, because he had to say something before his silence became too much.

This was the brilliantly devious idea. Have Severus kill him in a suitably dramatic and painless fashion. Dumbledore would be spared his agony and Severus would have the ultimate proof of loyalty to Voldemort, the perfect position from which to help the cause.

All Severus heard was I will get a hero’s death and you will be reviled and in the end it won’t matter because Harry will be dead. I have poisoned his mind enough that he would believe that he has to give up his life.

Harry.

Wonderful Harry with his funny thinking and his Slytherin ways and Lily’s gift for Potions and most importantly Lily’s laugh and Lily’s light. Harry who had inadvertently saved Severus’ soul and heart and was now saving him, once again, from losing his mind and becoming a murderer ahead of time.

Funny thing, Severus was a dreadful deatheater. He had never killed or tortured anyone. He allowed others to do it, which in his opinion was quite as bad. He didn’t speak up against the atrocities of his friends. But he had never killed.

Nor would he now, as much as he wanted to.

The worst threat a Slytherin can make is that they have taken an oath not to kill you.

***

To Voldemort he said: If and when Harry reappeared, Dumbledore and the Order would be the first to know. It was vital that Severus kept his position there. It was vital that they maintained their formation. Dumbledore’s death would mean their disbanding and then no one would be there to receive the news about Harry.

And Voldemort was pleased by Severus’ thoughts. He could wait, then, and he could try again to secure the prophecy. He could not say how important it was to hear it in full.

No, he could not. Severus was surprised to notice something on His Darkness voice, a careful tightening of the modulation. Something not unlike Severus’ own. Something he knew to be the
Voldemort was hiding something. Something that had to do with the night of his return that no one remembered.

To Dumbledore he said: Harry wasn’t here, he wasn’t here to be guided and manipulated. There was no guarantee that the message would get to him. Better wait, then, as much as possible. What if Dumbledore’s death sent him into deeper hiding? (Please, send him into deeper hiding. Please let him disappear forever, even if Severus never got to see him again. As long as he were out and away from this madness Severus would be close to happy).

Dumbledore was less satisfied, but he acquiesced. Severus was nothing if not persuasive. Still Dumbledore put the word through the Order, to find Sirius and Remus. Sirius was innocent and he needed their help. And Remus, too. Poor Remus, so lost, so confused.

If they found them, they could find Harry.

***

In Severus’ rooms at Hogwarts there was a basket of apples brought from Turkey, form a very old orchard in the middle of the country.

***

There are no words to express the dismay of the students when they discovered who was going to be the DADA teacher that year.

“At least we will learn something” offered Dean Thomas, ever the optimist.

“After five years of learning nothing” pointed Ron Weasley not inaccurately. “He is going to kill us and eat us whole.”

He was not wrong. Snape was very aware of the lacking education they had received and even more conscious of the threat approaching.

Summer seemed to have cleaned everything and pushed things back to their usual place as if nothing important had happened. New paint to cover the cracks. Dumbledore was back and so was the point system. The changes they had asked for had been implemented in the less expected way.

They had now an adequately knowledgably DADA teacher and yet he was the last person anyone wanted or expected. (Even the Slytherins were disgruntled. He was their Head of House they had learned to fear him). The curriculum for Muggle Studies had also been hurriedly updated. No one seemed satisfied by it but they accepted that it was a step forward even if a small and clumsy one. It was less patronising at the very least. Professor Binns, unfortunately, was still teaching History as he had been doing for decades.

The Board of Governors was satisfied and parents everywhere breathed a bit more easily knowing that all that Ministry nonsense had been put to rest. Hopefully the children would now get some proper schooling and everything would be fine. It would be. Scrimgeour was in power and so was Dumbledore. All was well.

But Hogwarts had changed at its core and all this was nothing more than trappings to dress the truth. The cracks were there and they were deeper than anyone had realized. The point system was back and the first years still cared a bit about it, but no one else worried and if they did (because some people are perfectionist goody-goodys with anxiety) they were sent to have a chat with Zabini and
they stopped worrying. There was also an open-house policy. Well, not policy, because they kept the passwords and the Board of Governors kept saying things like how important it was to respect tradition. So yes, not policy precisely. But most times the professors merely looked very tired when they found out-of-house students in their common room and they did not fight it so everybody was free to visit any of the four houses, official regulations be damned.

Hufflepuff had, by far, the cosiest common room. Who would have known? No one. No one before would have guessed it. No wonder they were so polite and laid-back, you would be too if you had such a nice warm room with the perfect lighting to read but without the glare hurting your eyes. They had cushions. They had pumpkin-shaped soft armchairs where you could nap. They had proper insulated windows unlike the tower houses.

Perhaps things could be pushed back into a semblance of normalcy but once tasted, there was no way the students were giving up on that wonderful room. No way they were going back to separate houses. Once someone asks where are the women there is no way you will look the same at a history book.

Gryffindor was a bit surprised and a bit upset to discover no one cared about their common room, which was high and windy. So was Ravenclaw’s, but at least once you arrived there you could get someone to help you with homework.

Everybody agreed that Slytherin’s was a bit gloomy and a bit melancholic and yet it attracted Ravenclaws like the candle to a bunch of bespectacled flies. You could see under the lake, in that room. They had a big underwater window and the Ravenclaws found it very relaxing. Snape got used to the vision of Ravenclaw girls hugging the glass of the window lake and crying with joy when the merpeople came to say hello.

***

Adventure books and movies very rarely feature bathrooms, unless there is a fight in them. It is quite understandable. A hero deserves a certain degree of privacy and nothing takes the drama away as a hint of toilet humour.

Draco didn’t find any humour in the situation. He would like to take a shower to wash the sweat away (and the acromantula’s little hairs). He found that he couldn’t because all of the bathrooms of the house had a problem or another.

The one in the first floor had something hairy growing on the floor and the mirror was cursed and the toilet paper dispenser tried to bite Harry on the hand. But mostly, it was the hair. They didn’t want to set a foot on it.

The master bathroom in the second floor had a freaking vampire inside that almost killed Draco from a heart attack before either of them had the chance of doing anything else. He was also quite rude as he insisted on attempting to eat both Draco and Harry instead of taking the exit they were offering him. Nothing like the previous vampires Draco had encountered.

Neither of them could remember when were they supposed to have studied vampires, but they were quite sure that they hadn’t. Still, they dealt with it successfully (Quidditch Seeker reflexes for the win!) but the bathroom had to be indefinitely closed after that. They hung a warning sign on the door and everything. They were not certain whether they had actually killed him or not (how could you tell with a vampire? this was a particularly old and wrinkly one, would that make a difference?) and they didn’t dare opening the door to check.

The bathroom on the third floor, the one that Sirius and Regulus would have shared a lifetime ago,
had spiders and crawling jiterings and, what was worse, the water had no pressure and might not even be water. It was unclear whether it was rust or blood but it certainly didn’t serve the purpose of showering.

There was no bathroom on the ground floor because at the time the house was built bathrooms were considered shameful and you would not have one in the same floor where you received visitors.

They made do with the third floor (possibly blood coming from the pipes) bathroom. Most mysteriously, the problem was in the shower, they could wash their hands all right in the sink.

***

It was a funny thing that the four of them were condemned to perpetual underestimation. It suited their interests, but still.

Remus had it worse because in Remus’ case it was double. They heard “werewolf” and immediately pictured a savage beast incapable of human intelligence and sensitivity and people kept thinking that way even after meeting him, like at any point Remus could snap and attempt to eat your left arm raw. Then they saw Remus, the soft, polite, conscious, Remus and they thought he was meek, thought he was like a dog in need of a master. Either a monster or a beast to be broken and tamed.

People forgot how strong he was, is the point, and how clever. Remus had a scarily good memory and stored knowledge like other people collected bad decisions.

Sirius, too, was often underestimated. It was stranger in his case because he was handsome and flashy. His talent should be obvious! and yet people tended to think it was mostly a façade of absurdly high self-confidence brought by his wealth and pureblood status. Plus he had studied at the same time that James Nomiddlename Potter, the boy who was good at Quidditch and Transfigurations and McGonagall’s favourite student despite herself. So perhaps one could be excused for not seeing the beauty of Sirius’ charms, the potency in each and every one of them. The way in which he took the rules of magic and bended them to his will and how he was so justified in his self-confidence. Sirius used his wand like the surgeon with the scalpel and the artist with the brush. Precisely and effectively.

He also did it mostly for chaos, but do not be mistaken, it was a beautiful, professionally crafted, chaos.

And the twins… Pranksters. Jokers. The only Weasleys not to become prefects and the ones who took the less OWLs and didn’t care about the NEWTs. Always with their silly jokes. Always laughing. They seemed so irresponsible, so immature, so careless.

Together they had developed over thirty new products which required the invention or radically new application of over twenty spells. To contextualize, spells were invented one at time by a single wizard. If the wizard was very prolific he might get three spells on his lifetime but rarely more than that. But these two wonderful idiots didn’t care. They played and experimented and came with new things and they were bringing Magic to the 20th century regardless of what anyone said.

And yet they were all underestimated because what they did and what they were wasn’t considered important. The eccentric pureblood and the werewolf and the twins that preferred laughter over serious studies. They could not do anything truly valuable.

Well they had just developed a cloak with an imbued protego charm that would save over two dozens lives in the approaching war. You know, for fun. Plus protego hats. And gloves that protected from poisons and cursed objects. Oh, and the Calling Wands (still in development). A
small hand sized wooden wand that easily fitted in all kind of pockets. Break it and it will emit an
alarm signal and call up to three wizards or witches you had previously designated to come to your
help.

(Now that was a tribute for the founder of the Interhouse Solidarity Party. The Boy Who Broken His
Wand).

But this week, they were launching the cloak. Available in a variety of colours (black, sky blue and
bubblegum pink) and patterns (dancing house elves or brooms) it was guaranteed to stop up to
twelve curses for the modicum price of thirty sickles.

It wouldn’t work forever and it didn’t stop everything. It certainly couldn’t stop a killing curse. But it
stopped surprise attacks, that was for sure, and it gave you a fighting chance. It made all the
difference. Shaklebot had already acquired one. So did Moody.

Sirius thought they were kind of ugly and the black ones, because black never fails you in couture (“I
should make that my personal motto, by the way”), were badly cut and rather than looking dramatic
and badass you looked as a scared crow (not a scarecrow but a frightened bird) tangled in a trash
bag.

“Yes, well, the fabric was at a discount” said Fred who, unlike George, had a very keen sense for
finances.

The development of protective hats took more time because they ran into some trouble with the
prototypes. Meaning that during the testing phase they almost severed George’s ear because they still
hadn’t gotten the range right.

***

As if by a secret pact, both Dumbledore and Voldemort avoided a new confrontation between the
two of them. Instead, the next weeks saw them working on building strength and resources.

Dumbledore tracked down Marvolo’s ring. He did not put it on, thank Merlin, but he was injured all
the same by the wards protecting the place.

Voldemort sealed an alliance with the giants. The werewolves came to his call.

Dumbledore thought he had learned the location of Slytherin’s locket, but he had grown more
cautious after the ring and did not try to retrieve it by himself. Neither did he take brilliant, brave,
Hermione Granger to retrieve it with him. Perhaps because he rightly guessed that McGonagall
would have his head. But the girl still learned about horcruxes, knowing she would have to inform
Harry at some point. Because Voldemort would never stop hunting her dear friend and Harry needed
help if he was to defeat Voldemort.

Slowly Voldemort augmented his power in the Ministry, more and more wizards and witches were
coming to his call. That was the most scary part of all, that people would follow his madness.

Dumbledore did all he could to protect the school and the children in it.

And neither managed to find the elusive Harry Potter. All they knew was that he was alive.

***

Severus was risking his life doing this. No, not only his life, because he would be the first to admit
that the life of a bitter ex-deatheater wasn’t worth much (others disagreed on that point), but also the
lives of many others who depended on him. He was risking his life coming again to Weasleys’ Wizards Wheezes so soon after his last visit, not even six months passed which would be the bare minimum. All so he could deliver some news and some ingredients in person and get maybe three minutes of solitude with his lover (ex-lover? He didn’t know, hence the need for that time). Only three minutes because, truly, he could not afford more time. He was still a triple spy with a day job that was extra hard.

He should have known. Severus never got nice things, not when it was a matter of heart.

He had arranged it so carefully, too. Everybody would have something to hold in their hands and go store it safely and he would have his three minutes, maybe four, with Remus. Were it not for that blight upon the face of the Earth that was Sirius Black.

“Excellent!” he said, the dunderhead. “Moony, will you hold this? Thanks. I have something to discuss with Snape.”

And he, he, took Severus by the arm and pushed him to the workshop beside the storeroom. Sirius should have died from the tension between Remus and Severus, he should have dropped dead from the intensity on Severus’ gaze. But no, he didn’t, the bastard.

Remus had looked equally frustrated and amused. He had not looked relieved at not finding himself alone with Severus. That was probably a good thing.

All the more frustrating, though.

“Snape” Sirius said the word as if he were casting a spell. He took a big dramatic breath. “I am sorry.”

There were so many quips on Severus’ tongue.

And yet you are here.

I am sorry, too, by your existence.

Just what in the seven hells do you think you are doing, ruining my carefully arranged private time?

Not sorry enough.

Let me show you the true meaning of the word.

But he didn’t say any of them. This idiot was Remus’. Remus’ friend or perhaps Remus’ ex-lover (he had eyes, Sirius was as gorgeous now as he had been then). Maybe even Remus’ current lover, and that thought hurt the most, but it was a familiar hurt. He never was anyone’s first choice.

And perhaps he would be replaced not only in Remus’ affections but also in Harry’s life. That was a dreadful thought that felt like stone crumbling and suffocating him. But it didn’t matter. It didn’t change anything other than Severus’ pulse. He would still fight Voldemort, he would still help Dumbledore (up to a point) and he would still, above anything else, make sure that Harry survived the war and had a happy home at the end. That was the initial goal and it would be the last.

Whether Severus was happy or even whether he survived didn’t matter. This was not about him.

Sirius kept talking.

“I was horrible at you in school and I should never have played that prank on you. None of the
pranks, actually, but you know which one I mean.”

How do you even respond to that?

“I know nothing I do or say will make a difference, but nevertheless, I apologize” Sirius went on. He
nodded at Severus with a martial air. “You may punch me in the face now, if you would like to.”

What.

Severus really only had three minutes to spare. He left without having spoken to Remus or punched
Sirius and feeling slightly dizzy from the shock.

Sirius was right, apologizing didn’t change the years of bullying, the loneliness and despair he had
felt. The abandon with which he had thrown himself to the arms of the first person to show some
genuine interest in him (another lie) and the mistakes he had made because of that.

But since Severus hadn’t been a pushover, exactly, and did manage to cast some curses of his own,
he could look back and see that he hadn’t been a victim as much as an enemy in a stupid and
pointless school war. The kids were right, the house system was perverse.

Sirius’ apology didn’t change the past, but it could change the present and the future.

Severus didn’t punch him and instead shook his hand.

Chapter End Notes

People reading this as a completed work, this is a mandatory rest stop. Drink some
water, go to sleep and come back in the morning.
“I am pretty sure this will be safe” said Harry while he curled a strand of hair on his finger. “It is so slow the Trace shouldn’t be able to pick it up.”

“Because it is not magic.”

“Sure it is! I read it in—"

“Magical Review, yes.” Draco crossed his arms. “It is a journal for squibs and half-wits.”

“Remus used to write in it.”

Ah.

Anyone with as little as an ounce of sense ought to see that Remus Lupin knew quite a lot of everything. When Harry had confessed that he used to believe, and in fact still did to a degree, that Remus was clairvoyant Draco couldn’t blame him. Remus had a supernatural ability to turn up with a piece of chocolate just when you needed one, even if you didn’t realize it at the time.

(Remus would say that the boys wore their hearts not so much in their sleeves but right in their faces. It required no art to know when they were in need of cheering up).

“Fine. But that is in no way magical.”

“It is basically a potion, if you think about it.”

No, it was not. It was a recipe. But an old one. The same dish prepared over and over through millennia. The scholar claimed that it protected against dark spirits. They had made the house cleaner and safer, but they could use a bit of ancestral help.

They had to soak the lentils in water for a whole night before they (Harry really, Draco was only looking) could begin to prepare the brew (stew, to be honest). He peeled and cut the garlic lovingly, chopped the onions and the carrots with precise movements. He added the spices with the same serious countenance of Severus, looked through all of the bay leaves until he found the two satisfactory ones to add to the pot.

He did not sing. He would have liked to do that while he cooked, but that would activate the Trace for sure. He sung in his mind, though, while he chopped the ingredients and stirred the pot. When the water started to boil, he thought family thoughts, just as the article said. He wished for good things to come as he added the salt. He gave a spoonful to Draco to try and tell if it needed more spice.

It did. A bit more pepper.
This was a step of the process, too, find someone you liked and give them a spoonful to try. Or if no one was available, offer it to yourself with the same heart and mind with which you would offer it to a loved one.

And at the end they had, if nothing else, a nice stew to eat. They poured a ration for Kreacher in a china bowl decorated with a blue line.

Kreacher was distressed by the new masters cooking and even more by sharing their food. But Harry insisted and Draco just told him he would have to eat the same food as them, not just today but from now on. He was too thin in any case.

Neither Harry nor Draco noticed anything particularly magical with the lentils. They were good, the bay leaves were a good addition. The food was comforting without being fattening, just the kind of thing for autumn and winter so they didn’t consider it a failure.

Neither Harry nor Draco noticed any effects, true, but then again the magic was not for them. The author of the article had done a decent job of tracing the recipe (with as many variations as families are between the north of the Mediterranean and the south of Ethiopia) and finding the essential steps. But he had messed a bit the translation.

This was not a recipe against dark spirits. It would not protect you from evil forces.

Lentil soup against a dark spirit would had been more accurate.

Kreacher took the bowl to his corner on the far side of the kitchen, where they once stored the coal. It was a safe place for him, a place nobody went to, and there he ate the soup because Draco had told him to.

And with each spoonful he washed the Drink of Despair from his system.

***

There was quite a lot to do in the house, that house that at first felt like a crypt. There was the ever constant cleaning and fighting against the house itself. They had to stop the doxies and other creatures from moving back. There was cooking. Hours spent in the kitchen, the only really warm room of the house.

And then, there was the hours spent of the library. Because even when they were not cleaning or fighting back they had to do something and they couldn’t listen to music so they read. Harry was a bit disappointed at the fiction collection, the usual racist garbage you could find in any pureblood house. But there were also other books on funny foreign magic and he read those. Regulus Black had been a bit if a geek just like him and Harry read all he had. It turned out Harry had no problem with education as long as it were in his own terms.

Draco read, too. There was quite a nice, if slightly outdated, collection of history books and Draco read those, simply because he was a history nerd and Harry wasn’t allowed to make fun of that. He also drew quite a bit because he had a natural talent and people who can draw do it all the time. Doodles upon doodles on napkins and corners and never in proper nice paper that you could later frame. No. People who can draw will do it in the worst medium available. It drove Harry crazy.

And then of course there was the novels on the low shelf in the left corner of the library. The ones you had to bend down to get to them. Harry hadn’t even noticed them and they weren’t in English in any case. But Draco did.

***
“What do you mean you speak French?”

“All Malfoys are raised bilingual. My mother always speaks and writes in French to me. I will admit
my writing is not as good as it could be though.” Said Draco with that irritating dismissive air of the
people who can think in another language but still claim not to be good enough with it.

“I feel so uneducated right now.”

“Says the boy who subscribes to Magical Review, come on now.”

True, Harry wasn’t feeling uneducated exactly. He didn’t know what he was feeling.

Puberty had found Harry shaking off the depression from first year; doing so bad in school it wasn’t
fair to call it “struggling”, struggling implied you were still trying and he was not; desperately
wanting to go back to his home and his family; and occasionally worrying about Voldemort.

Other than a few zits and the unwavering certainty that all adults were criminally stupid, Harry
hadn’t really felt the typical symptoms of adolescence. A few hormones here and there, some
moodiness when he had always been a happy and sunny child, but really, that was nothing. Ron
agonized over his appearance to the point that the dress robes for the Yule ball made him physically
ill (Fred and George claimed to feel the same when they saw him wearing them). Seamus set
something on fire twice a week and sometimes daily.

Harry had glided through all of it, as if he were too cold and slippery to be affected by such human
emotions. He lived in his own world in any case, in the space of his wandering thoughts and his
music.

But not now, not anymore. Now his unacknowledged libido was coming up to him with a wicked
smile. “Come here, you nitwit” the libido was saying as Harry was slapped across his face twice,
hard, actually one more time for maximum retention, you fool.

Draco spoke French. Draco could read the French books in the house. He could pronounce the letter
R indecently. It wasn’t about the language itself, it could be German or Korean and Harry would feel
the same. It was the fact that he could say things in another language, that he could see what seemed
a random string of letter and noise and get meaning from them. It was the skill and wow did it make
Harry feel things.

***

What even was the point of being a seer if life was still going to throw this kind of surprises to you?
What? No, really, Percy wanted to know. He would wait.

Percy didn’t like Rufus Scrimgeour. He understood why the public would like him though, because
the man looked very much like a lion and that is exactly the kind of leader you want when you are
arriving to the war a year late. Where Fudge had been a mild limp bureaucrat Scrimgeour was all
hard muscle and oil. He was effective and, better yet, he looked so.

He was also the kind of man who corralled women in empty corners, who worked until late and
made sure to go talk to them when they were all alone in the office.

Percy worked very hard and often until late. He was truly quite a punctilious worker, but mostly he
wanted everyone to have the impression that he was always in the office. That way no brows rose if
he was at the Ministry after hours (say, on his way to save his father’s life) and it gave him a
convenient alibi for the days when he actually sneaked earlier (say, to go save his brother’s Bill life).
Besides, the building was dark after hours, all shadows of blue and grey and he found it easier to
think then.

He had walked on Scrimgeour harassing some woman in a junior position twice. And he had had to set a rubbish bin on fire on at least three different occasions to cause a commotion that would interrupt Scrimgeour chasing after someone else.

Rufus Scrimgeour might be willing to face Voldemort when Fudge had only hidden his head under his wing. He might even be actually honest in his courage and intentions to stop the monster. But he wasn’t good. He was a hunter. He preyed.

To give credit where it was due, if he managed to blindside Voldemort as he had just done with Percy the war would be over before Christmas.


Scrimgeour liked power more than he liked people. Percy had known that. It wasn’t about sex, it was about possession and ownership and the illusion of control. Still, this was unexpected.

Percy left the room walking backwards, still staring at the man who had just propositioned him, laughing madly all the way back to his desk.

*(Coerced actually, not propositioned, or threatened. What was the difference?)*

*(You know what? Coercion implies you went through the action and Percy had been so shocked he hadn’t even said no. He had just laughed and gone back to his desk. The word he was looking for probably was soliciting.*

***

Of course Percy’s refusal brought consequences. He was demoted as far as it was possible in his category and snubbed at every opportunity and harassed and harassed and harassed. This was another form of control after all. It also turned out to be a blessing because everyone assumed, rightly so in Percy’s opinion, that Scrimgeour’s obvious backlash was retaliation for Percy’s dutiful work with Fudge.

There would be a time when this benefited Percy.

For now, though, he was miserable and lonely and missed his home. He missed the comfort of his mum’s sweaters and her food. He missed his brothers, too. They would know what to do with someone giving Percy grief like Scrimgeour was doing.

*(Bill and Ginny would very probably murder him. Percy couldn’t have that, but he still missed the opportunity to convince them not to kill someone for his sake.)*

On bad days, he wrote to Charlie. Safe in Romania, he could be honest with Charlie, or as honest as he dared in a letter. Perhaps because he was the strongest of them all, Charlie had also always been the kindest. He talked to Percy. Even if he didn’t approve of his disavowal of the family he steadfastly clung to their relationship and talked to Percy and wrote back. They couldn’t say anything important, but he told Percy of their work in the reserve (dragons, for all their mystique, were nothing more than big kitties and lizards, and the people working with them were dorks) and in between the lines he snuck news of the family. That way Percy learned that Bill was in love and that Ginny was one of the most well liked girls in the school and very interested in Quidditch.

On the really bad days, when the bullying became a bit too much or when the reports came and he saw it was more of the same, people grasping at air and doing nothing to stop Voldemort; on those
days Percy went to *A la Maison Blanche* (not sure the French was right) and got a table on the far left corner. From there, he could see the front of Weasley’s Wizards Wheezes and the crowds coming and going. He had heard about a new line of products, shield hats and cloaks. He watched and he thought that they would be safe, they had people looking over them and it brought him comfort.

***

Hermione wouldn’t go to the Burrow for Christmas. Not all the days, at least.

Ron said he would go with her. He had no idea where she was planning to go but it had finally dawned to him, during summer, what Hermione had done to protect her family and why. They had had a fight about it, actually more like two different fights. Hermione defended her decision and fought because she was scared. Ron tried to make her see that she didn’t have to do it alone and neither did Harry, it was his decision too, and his right, to put his life in danger to accompany them. Besides, he had plenty of older, brighter, shinier brothers. He was the spare.

Hermione had to hit him with a cushion for making that joke, but they were all right. It was good.

They took the Knight Bus. Left a fuming Ginny in the Burrow before continuing their trip. They were going to find Harry. Hermione had a message for him.

He was not in his childhood house, which was good news because Ron said there were alarms all around it. Ron had a pretty good eye for spotting that kind of thing. Probably because he grew up with the twins.

He was not in the derelict single room cottage still under Lupin’s name. No one seemed to have lived there in years, not since Lupin moved out.

He was not in the house that used to belong to Lupin’s father and by now Ron was asking how the hell had she gotten all that information from Hogwarts.

“Honestly, Ron, Have you still not read *A History of Hogwarts*?”

“… You are taking the piss now, aren’t you?”

Hermione laughed, a rarer and rarer thing these days. Ron could have kissed her right now just for that, for a single glimmer of the fire girl he loved so much. Only that was part of the problem with them, wasn’t it? They loved each other and yet…

Was it a sibling love?

Was it something else?

They didn’t know, and the fog of war didn’t make things any clearer.

They left, by bus again, to the last location on Hermione’s list. She was certain that Harry wouldn’t be there, but perhaps he would have let a message. Any hint as to how to contact him.

Unfortunately, they were travelling by the very public Knight Bus rather than apparating. Unfortunately it was Hermione Granger, the brilliant mudblood everybody had heard about, with her distinctive hair. Unfortunately she was escorted by Ronald Weasley, the youngest boy of the equally distinctive and recognizable Weasley family, the blood traitors.

They were persons of interest by themselves, but they were also Harry Potter’s closest friends.
They were noticed, and people were alerted.

They were followed.

***

Little Whinging was pretty in a sort of serially produced way. Every house identical and with the same Christmas decorations, different only in the arrangement of the ornaments and the occasional exotic (see: continental) figurine.

Every street looked the same and Ron had been there in summer so it took them a while to find Privet Drive. But they didn’t mind. They could just as well explore the town since they didn’t know if Harry had left a clue at the house rather than the park or the church. It was Harry, his mind worked in mysterious ways. They walked down the street side by side and it was almost nice, a stolen moment. The street was quiet and pleasant in a compliant, non threatening way. There was a thin layer of snow, probably gone by the end of the day, and there was that small satisfaction from walking over snow. The crunch, crunch, crunch of every step.

Hermione had a white scarf and beret. It looked really nice with her hair and Ron told her so.

Winter is a season of silence. It is not so much that the world goes to sleep as it is holding its breath. Every sound in winter is amplified a thousand times.

They had arrived to a cross-street. One of those places where multiple streets connect and some city commission has put greenery and maybe a sculpture in the middle. It is not a park and it is not a street. Just a place of in between to connect everything else.

pop pop pop

chunch crunch... CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH

They were not alone.

Hermione barely had time to look over her shoulder before Ron grabbed her hand and ran. It was so fast she couldn’t really say what was behind them, she saw but she didn’t know what she had seen. Ron didn’t even look back. He was a wizard from a pureblood family, he knew the pop of the apparition from a hundredth meters away.

He took her past the obligatory sculpture (it looked like a drowning seabird but it was supposed to be a metaphor of the English temperament, or so the art dealer said) and down the grass towards the bushes. He was trying to keep them both out of sight. You can’t hit what you can’t see.

There were voices. Male. Adult. They said things like “there they are” and “get them.”

They ran and ran through the grass and the bushes and past another sculpture and down a tunnel you almost couldn’t see until you were right there by the entrance. It was the same subway where Harry and Dudley had been attacked by dementors a year and a half ago, but of course they didn’t know that and it didn’t matter.

“Ron! I can do magic” gasped Hermione when they came to the other side. She was a year older, they always forgot that. She was also red in the face and panting.

“Not against them!” cried Ron. He had seen the robes and the masks, there was no magic to stop that. He had his wand in his hand, though, because he had seen the robes and the masks and hell if he cared about being expelled from Hogwarts for doing magic. His mother would kill him but the
twins would give him sanctuary and the point was those were deatheaters, and of course he was fighting back.

He tried to grab her hand again, but Hermione was not about to hold her wand left handed, so he had to content himself with taking her by the elbow and pushing again to get farther away. Maybe they could call the bus again. Maybe they could-

“And where are you going in such a rush?”

Oh, dear.

“You have a problem, mate? Expecting you somewhere?”

Freaking dark wizards chasing them and they had to be stopped by a gang. A muggle gang. A teenager muggle gang.

“You should know, this is our territory” the leader of the gang informed them. A boy with blonde hair who was just in the other side of the spectrum of Draco Malfoy. Blonde, yes, male, yes, but also tall and burly and with a hideous track-suit. The spirit, however, was the same.

“We didn’t know” said Ron, while Hermione threw worried glances over her shoulder to the subway they had just left behind. “Sorry. We will be going, then.”

He nodded goodbye, left hand still holding fast Hermione’s arm, the right clutching his wand tight. It was cold, not too cold, but cold enough that his hands shouldn’t be sweating.

The boys stepped forward. Five of them, armed with bats and ugly looks.

pan pan pan PAN PAN PAN PAN PAN PAN

Those were steps over concrete, running steps, coming from the tunnel. They had found the entrance. They were coming for them.

“Look, we are leaving” Hermione spoke quickly. “But you need to leave too. There are, um, bad people are coming.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“This is our territory” repeated one of the boys. A stocky one with a bowl cut.

But it was too late. Three deatheaters emerged from the tunnel into the solitary park. Hermione closed her eyes for a second. They could run, Ron and her, she couldn’t apparate yet but she could try, take Ron with her and put some distance between them. But they couldn’t let those idiots behind to be murdered by deatheaters.

“There they are!” cried one of the robed figures. They all looked the same with the robes and the masks. “We got you.”

“Oi, this is our territory!” cried a different boy, a thin tall one with a very big nose. They were certainly very adamant about that fact. This place was theirs.

“You really need to go, please” begged Hermione.

“Listen to the girl, muggle.” The deatheaters were coming toward them but not running. They were, after all, before a bunch of muggles and two teenagers in an open space with no parapets to hide. No need to rush. They relished these instants of fear as they strutted closer. “Run home to your mama.”
They had their orders. If the muggles ran they wouldn’t give chase. They were here for the girl and the boy. Of course if they decided to stay and be tortured they would be happy to oblige.

“What did you call me?” asked the boy.

“I think he insulted your mug” peeped a high pitched voice. This wasn’t a bad guess given the unfortunate face of his friend.

Hermione and Ron were turning their backs to the five boys, their wands raised against the approaching wizards.

What a horrible sight it was and yet Hermione and Ron faced it. The three men, one of them tall and heavy like a titan, walking towards them with their black robes and cloaks billowing behind. They were so calm and so sure that they had nothing to fear from the two of them, so confident in their power. They had cause to be. Rosier had a double digit count of murders. McNair was the Ministry’s executioner and he had put many house-elves and goblins and werewolves to death. Dolohov didn’t have the same kill numbers, he preferred torture over murder.

His victims did not.

“No” said the gang leader. He had been silent since the first exchange, quietly assessing Ron and Hermione. He was not someone given to much reflection but lately he had been doing quite a lot of it. He had come to the conclusion that Ron wasn’t dragging Hermione with a nefarious purpose and that neither of them were like the kind of strange people that had occasionally come poking around his neighborhood. “He said you are dumb, Piers. That what it means, isn’t it?” He signaled at the deatheaters with his chin. He had quite a lot of chin and jaw and neck. “Muggles are dumb.”

“Good to see you recognize your place” Rosier called. “Scum.”

This was a disaster. They were standing so close now, all of them.

Hermione pleaded one more time. So did Ron. Perhaps they asked the boys to go or the deatheaters to let them leave, but neither listened. They would fight, then, and hope that once the alarm for underage magic and magic in front of muggles were activated the Ministry would send some good wizards to help.

“Oh, I think it’s time you meet the Big D.”

Surprisingly, this was not a dick joke and it was said with utter seriousness by the huge blonde boy who might have be referring to himself or possibly to the cricket bat he was holding affectionately in his big meaty hands.

Of course, this meant nothing to the deatheaters. Dolohov made a slashing movement with his wand and purple flames erupted from it, flying toward the two of them and the group of muggle boys surrounding them.

There was a ring, high and pure. It was the sound you expected to hear when the pure of heart hero stopped the sword of the black knight with his singing sword. It was what you imagined when the old chronicles spoke of silver trumpets and bells. It was produced, however, by Piers Polkiss’ aluminium baseball bat whipping the curse right back at the wizards who had to quickly step aside.

Scholars agree on the difficulty of sorting history’s most fearsome warriors in a scale. Viking berserkers deserve a position of honour, of course, and so do the jaguar warriors of the Aztec empire. But somewhere in there, there should be a place for white suburban teenagers who had grown up spoiled and resenting the lenient parents that allowed them everything. Spoiled brats who ended up
hating the world, their families, and themselves. Of course they do not have the charm of the other
groups mentioned, but their blood lust is one and the same.

The gang fell over the deatheaters. In the short range, a carbon reinforced cricket bat is much more
powerful than a wand.

“Stand back, losers!” yelled the boy possibly known as Big D (unless the Big D were the bat in
which case he would be the owner). Hermione and Ron ducked as the boy swung the cricket bat
over their heads and broke Dolohov’s right arm.

“Freeeeeaks!” screamed another boy with deep repressed fury against his ever absent accountant
father. He was later identified as Malcom.

“This. Is. Our. Ter.Ri.To.Ry.” Piers Polkiss punctuated his syllables with the hits of his bat against
Rosier’s ribs. He was easily a head and half shorter than the deatheater and as a wide as one of his
legs but the size difference only meant that there was more of Rosier to hit.

“Excuse me” said Hermione, who Ron now saw was totally insane or a true Gryffindor as she was
trying to grab the attention of the gang leader. “We are looking for a friend of ours.”

“You are friends with Little Pea, right?” huffed the boy. He had just sent Walden McNair to the floor
with a very well placed kick. Robes and masks have a very high cool factor but are a terrible
encumbrance during a fight.

“Little Pea?” Hermione mouthed the words silently. “Oh, because he is short and his name is Potter.
Are you Dudley?”

He was. He was also currently kicking Evan Rosier on the stomach while Piers Polkiss went on with
his bat-to-the-ribs mantra. He didn’t know and he probably wouldn’t care that Rosier was
responsible for the death of at least twelve muggles. A few steps back Gordon and Dennis were
beating the wizarding supremacy out of Antonin Dolohov, who would never look at muggles the
same ever again. Probably because he had a fractured orbital bone.

Dudley Dursley’s life had changed after almost being killed by dementors two summers ago. He was
a new boy now. One who was no better at controlling his rage, but who had learned to redirect it to
worthier targets.

As a trial, during Easter break he and his gang had gone to the nearby town of Snobbington and
beaten the crap out of the local gang there who lately had been bothering the homeless and a couple
on Indian-owned business. Winning over someone who fought back was way more enjoyable than
harassing little kids. Fighting adults, like today, well that was the real deal. It was almost like fighting
back against your mom who treated your younger sister like crap because she refused to accept she
was lesbian. It was the therapeutic release of rage after you realized that what your parents were
doing to your cousin was not at all right and they should have at least been a bit worried when he
didn’t return during the summer.

Rosier may have a dozen kills but Malcom had a mom with a drinking problem who refused to see
her husband’s infidelities, and he was failing in school because he had undiagnosed dyslexia.

Ron asked if he could have a go and they made space for him to kick Dolohov. He could see the
merits of this fighting and meditation technique. He also remembered to take their wands.

Meanwhile, Hermione explained to Dudley that Harry had left the school (“really? Good for him.
Who would have thought it of the Little P?”) and were trying to contact him. Unfortunately Dudley
couldn’t tell them much, other that Harry had been “a real bro” that summer. He sent him all his best and not to worry, no matter what that Merlin wannabe said, Harry didn’t have to come back to Privet Drive if he didn’t want to. His bro Dudley would help him with that.

***

It wasn’t long before the wizards from the Ministry started to arrive. There had been a casting of a grade 2 curse in the presence of muggles after all. It was long enough, however, that they could have just as easily arrived to find the five boys dead and no trace of Ron and Hermione.

Dudley’s Gang didn’t take well to their attempt at *obliviating* them and expressed their discontent in the only form they knew to communicate. Piers ended up breaking his bat after one too many curses deflected. Dennis was hit by an *obliviating* charm. He blinked in surprise for a second but seeing that he was standing with his mates fighting some funny clothed group he arrived to the conclusion that he probably was concussed or something and he should just keep fighting those tossers.

Hermione and Ron left soon after that. They took the bus, a proper muggle one, to another city before calling the Knight Bus there. Just in case they stopped on another muggle village and walked from there to the Burrow.

They hadn’t found Harry and yet Hermione felt like she had discovered something. Something weird, kind of an instinctive thought that eluded her. She was good with logic but Harry was better at making certain leaps of thought and there was one here. She could see the gap but she couldn’t make the logic jump.

Ron, for his part, was wondering at the sheer brazenness of three deatheaters attacking them in a muggle street and at the slow response of the Ministry.

Ron was a chess player. He understood that certain moves can only be done when you have many pieces with you. You don’t risk a bishop or a queen unless you have your king well defended.

He wondered at Voldemort being able to sacrifice three big players today. A tower and the two knights, he would say.

***

Christmas that year felt as if it were upside down. People sensed what had already started, the war they still didn’t call by that name, and they didn’t know whether the holiday spirit was a defence against wicked things or a call for them to come.

The twins left for the Burrow with the promise to bring back leftovers for Sirius and Remus. Charlie was still in Romania and Bill went to France because he was completely besotted, so Percy’s absence wasn’t as noticeable as the previous year. Still, the Burrow was three sons down, four in you counted Harry which everyone did.

There were plenty of leftovers. Molly just couldn’t cook a Christmas meal for less than seven children. She hadn’t been able for a long while.

Christmas at the joke shop was actually better. Remus told Sirius of Harry’s Christmases, of the presents he received and of his immediate sharing nature. He had told him before, every year since they escaped Azkaban, but repetition didn’t diminish the pleasure of hearing that James’ and Lily’s son had a happy life and received adequate presents. And since they were in the topic, Remus found himself sharing his own history of gift exchanges with Severus and for some reason Sirius demanded details down to the exact colour and pattern and fabric of each gift.
And then he laughed. And he said, with the same singsong voice of their teenager days that obviously this boy liked Remus and Remus was blushing and did he like him back?

So of course Remus had to hit him repeatedly with a cushion and they fought a bit and it was nice, laughter and foolery and ribbing each other. Sirius got on Remus’ case with Severus and he was so insistent that Remus had to confess about Gideon to distract him. It worked, because Sirius was so shocked he had to circle the room twice and then lay down for a bit.

_Gideon Prewett!

“Did he really have an eight pack? I heard he had an eight pack.”

“For Merlin’s sake, Sirius! Drop it! And I don’t think that’s even possible.”

“Okay, but: Redheads. You know you have to answer that.”

“Don’t even ask!”

“So, the red goes…”

“Sirius, no.”

Christmas in Hogwarts was nothing like that. They were all too aware of the war. They were in those days painted in white in which the war hasn’t officially started and yet you feel the casualties all the same. When you think that there is nothing that you can do, that you should do, only wait and trust in your government, but people are disappearing and dying all the same.

There was nothing they could say to Susan Bones about the murder of her aunt. Nothing to console her.

They were good days for Severus, though. Not cheery, not happy, but he had a little bit more time. He could sleep almost seven hours and he could use the student-free time to work and prepare. The apples had been pressed and mashed and he could make the brew now that would need at least six months to repose.

He did not miss Harry or Remus. Harry, he knew, would be perfectly fine as long as he stayed wherever he was. No one had managed to find the smallest trace of him. And so far, no one had thought to look for Draco in case they were together.

Poor Draco, most people thought his father had him killed. There was a memorial poster for him in the Slytherin common room, one of the Gryffindors had done the drawing. The pieces of his wand were in a glass showcase box.

And he did not miss Remus because he knew Remus would be in a warm safe place and also when he thought of him he couldn’t help thinking that he was in the company of the very handsome Sirius Black and Severus really didn’t have the time or energy for that kind of thoughts.

Lies. He missed them both. But for once he wasn’t worried about them and that gave him such a sweet sense of calm that it overcame the hunger to see them.

Harry and Draco had a good time. They shouldn’t, given the circumstances, but they did because they were determined to make it so. Harry had experience on happiness and he knew how it should go.

The house was cold, no matter what they did. But so was the Gryffindor tower and the Slytherin
dungeons. They put on more clothes, woollen socks and sweaters from people that left the house long ago, people who were already dead.

People who were all taller than them, too. They had rolled up trousers legs and socks up to their knees and sleeves tied on the elbow and it was all pretty comfy and so the coldness of the house didn’t make them unhappy. Some nights it was freezing outside and it felt miserable inside and on those really cold nights they slept together, huddled for warmth under a pile of blankets at they did not mind at all, although Harry found himself inordinately focused on Draco’s breathing.

(and, maybe, his smell, because Draco smelled really nice and his hair was super soft)

But that was during autumn and the start of winter. When Christmas came it became evident that they had done something (yes, both, Harry refused to take the blame entirely) that had definitely broken poor Kreacher.

The elf decided to decorate.

Did he help clean the house? No. Had the bathroom situation seen any improvement? Barely. The hair on the first floor kept growing back and they had heard some knocks from the second floor that indicated the vampire was still alive.

But Kreacher decorated the house and cooked a Christmas dinner and lunch and provided an empty space for Harry to direct the baking of the dessert.

The ones hiding had a better time than the ones in the open, that Christmas. That was fair.

***

Scrimgeour was killed on January. The Ministry held for a few weeks until the middle of February, when it was taken down and Pius Thicknesse stepped as the new Minister. The horrible poisonous toad was instantly promoted. So was Percy.

Scrimgeour had made Percy sick. Actual, kneeling in the bathroom retching, sick. But he still wished he could had saved him because he would had saved the Ministry with him.

But Percy was selfish. Percy wasn’t thinking about the Minister, he was outside discretely following Fleur Delacour and making sure she arrived to The Leaky Cauldron and her date with Bill. He had no time to warn Scrimgeour. He hadn’t known he was going to die anyway, he only felt like something bad might happen to him. Percy had been hoping he would drink some spoiled milk.

At last Percy was in the position he wanted. At last he was in a place where he could make sure his mother would never know such devastation as she had known in that dream. He would make sure that Fred, or George, because he still didn’t know which one would— and which one would have to go on; he would make sure they never had to know it, either.

But as he made his way to where he was now, Percy had changed.

He had only done this for his family.

But then he had helped Shacklebolt and Moody and stolen those wands and sent Black and Lupin to his brothers. He was still doing it for his family, that was his main concern. But he was now also doing it for himself.

“Miss Clearwater” he called, affecting a pompous tone. “A word.”
He took her to his office by the elbow and made it so that people would see his stern face through the blinds while he spoke. They wouldn’t see Penelope’s surprised expression. Only Percy talking to her.

“If you say no to me, you can say goodbye to this job” he whispered angrily as he opened the door and shoved her out. He had become a master at noticing people’s behaviour and saw Carter flinch.

But Carter, the dirty coward, didn’t say a word as Penelope put on her coat and took her wand and said through her tears that she was just stepping out for a bit of fresh air. Percy looked at her go from his office, her shoulders shaking inside her pretty red coat. On her way out she came across Angelina Johnson who had come every day that week arguing (pleading) for her father’s case. Percy saw as Penelope threw her arms over Angelina, how the girl looked surprised but hugged her and patted her back anyway.

He looked at them go, cold and unmoving, over the suddenly silent office and the backs hunched over the tables. Over Carter’s abetting silence and Padley’s lone look of reproach and Sullivan’s smirk of satisfaction.

Johnson didn’t come back that day. She had been quite a nuisance so people noticed her presence more than her absence. Clearwater didn’t come to work the next day, either, and people did notice that. But no one said a word. As Percy reasoned, if they were quiet with Scrimgeour they would be doubly so now.

***

Angelina Johnson’s house was attacked that night. But she hadn’t returned home so she wasn’t dragged out of her bed, she wasn’t raped and beaten and she wasn’t left unconscious on the wet pavement with the neighbours too afraid to do anything until the next morning. None of that happened because she ran into Penelope Clearwater who cried in her arms and whispered in her ear that they had to go, right now, don’t look back.

And Penelope… Penelope quitted her job. So the next day she didn’t go with the girls for a drink at the pub and she didn’t witness those dark wizards saying awful things about Harry Potter and harassing a halfblood (nothing too bad, nothing the halfblood hadn’t heard before) and most importantly she didn’t stand up and put herself in front of the halfblood. What a stupid Gryffindor thing to do anyway, and she was a Ravenclaw! She didn’t get to do that and so she didn’t die on her way to St. Mungo, her throat slashed open with a curse, and of course the Ministry will look into the matter and arrest any suspects and of course everybody knows they won’t.

None of that happened.

What happened was that Percy Weasley sat on the floor of his London apartment that night and cried, big wet sobs that shook all of his body. He didn’t even know whether it was relief that it didn’t happen or grief for what he had seen, because it didn’t happen but to him it was all real. He cried until he was laying on the floor and he was so tired that no more tears would come.

He had a folder with newspapers clippings and handwritten notes. The first one was in French, from an Egyptian newspaper, and on the top right corner he had written 4 dead à 0 dead. A morbid tally of his actions.

***

There was little that Harry and Draco could do, other that remain alive. These days, they being alive was an act of defiance all by itself.
They read the papers and they turned even more resolutely to the house. They conquered the house at the end of January. They managed to cover the grooves in the windows that made those blasted cold drafts and they convinced Kreacher to help them move the portraits to the attic during the night so the figures wouldn’t notice a thing. Draco had made a list of contents when he stored the cursed objects in a trunk, and so they now knew to look for a music box that put people to sleep. They set it open next to the paintings and closed the attic door behind them.

Every room was theirs, every room safe.

Well, not the bathrooms. But otherwise it didn’t feel like they were intruding in someone else’s territory anymore. Except for the hall, because they just couldn’t move the portrait of Walburga. But they covered it with a thick blanket and were pretty sure she wouldn’t hear a thing. Kreacher stared with big eyes open wide as they carefully enveloped Walburga Black, but he didn’t put much of a fight.

They read the papers and there was a shift on the books they took from the library. Harry still read on weird old magic and Draco still read on history, but there was a new intent to it. Like the bulb sleeping on winter under the earth, a promise of power once spring comes.

***

Making Pius Thicknesse Minister of Magic was a brilliant move. Because Thicknesse was not Voldemort, he was merely a career politician, and so other governments couldn’t really say that an unholy monster was controlling Great Britain and had invaded the republic of Ireland. They still had to play nice while the Ministry started their hunt for halfbloods and muggleborns.

The French Bureau and German Ministerium stood in surprise waiting for the other to make a move so they could do exactly the opposite or maybe the same but ten times as big. And so they did nothing, although the French wizards, being closer, did shift restlessly.

The delegates of the Italian commission managed to arrive to their meeting with Thicknesse’s cabinet despite all the sabotage. The Presidente had made a discourse on friendship and tradition and values and there were those who cheered and those who were afraid and started to pack an emergency suitcase.

At the first news of Voldemort’s seize of power, there was a coup in Spain and the governing Concejo fell. There was a night of absolute terror as everybody thought that Voldemort had just won himself a plum ally. But by the end of the week it became obvious that if anything Spain would be more of a demanding headache than an ally. There were already four different groups who refused to recognize the Thicknesse-friendly government of Ibáñez and were fighting either to depose him or for independence, nobody knew for sure, and the Spaniards had thrown themselves into the “guerra de guerrillas” with absolute delight.

Portugal just stood to the side, praying that everybody would forget of their existence, as they usually did, and taking refugees while adamantly denying they were doing so.

Nobody knew what the countries in East Europe were thinking, mostly because there were no translators available and their governments had all suddenly and simultaneously forgotten their English and could not answer to the delegates sent by Thicknesse. This included Romania, but Margarita Ardelean, the director of the dragon sanctuary, was a bit more politically engaged when she assured her staff that they would keep the dragons out of the conflict at all costs and if anyone came with the intention to hurt her staff (which included two squibs because the dragons liked them) they had her permission to drop them in a cage and feed them to the Hungarian Horntail.
Hermione had no reason to suspect Ernie McMillan. Hufflepuff, good student and a good ear for music. He did tend to speak in a pompous manner, kind of like Percy Weasley. But that is hardly a big fault.

Had Remus been there, had Sirius been there, they would have told her not to be trusting just because someone is nice. Peter Pettigrew used to be nice, and a Gryffindor, and had a good hand for drawing. (He had in fact drawn the Marauder Map that the others enchanted). But they weren’t there, nor could they be, and so Hermione trusted him when that Saturday Ernie told her he had to show her something in Hogsmeade, past the Shrieking Shack.

He said he was sorry. He did look sorry. That was the thing that gave it such an ugly bitter taste. He was no true follower of Voldemort, not a blood supremacist, yet he was betraying Hermione nevertheless. Because he was afraid, for his family, all of them pureblooded and part of the Sacred Twenty Eight, for himself.

“Well hello, sweetie” said Bellatrix Lestrange. “We are going to have lots of fun together, you and I.”

Chapter End Notes

I know. How could I? But that line is such a good ending for a chapter! People who read this as a WIP, you are the real Gryffindors and I salute you. There will be a short extra chapter midweek. Lentils are consumed in many places of Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa and somehow everybody feels like they are their very traditional local dish. They are also a good food for the coldest months.
When they heard that… When they learned the news that she…

Ron turned white and dropped to the floor and stayed there fighting a fainting spell. He couldn’t even cry because he couldn’t breath. The world became blurry and colourless and he would never know if he had fainted or not, he wouldn’t remember those hours very well.

Neville demonstrated an admirably courage that day. He was the only one standing, the only one composed enough to give some aid to the most distraught students, to hug them and give them water and cast a calming spell here and there. (Not a Cheering charm, though, because they never worked quite well in these situations, he knew that). When he changed clothes that night, his robes were wrinkled and soaked in tears and snot. He had become a man that day, an adult. The scared clumsy boy turned into the one offering comfort.

The news left Hogwarts. Minerva McGonagall was shocked when the letter to Granger’s parents, that had taken her all evening to compose, was returned that same night. She realized then that Hermione had known and had prepared. She cried that night like she hadn’t cried since the death of that other brilliant student of hers, Lily Evans.

***

Ernie McMillan had been careful and discreet, but still he didn’t manage to stay beneath suspicion. Ginny had misgivings. Ginny asked Pansy Parkinson who, as a Slytherin, should know how to get someone to confess their most hidden shames. They set a trap for Ernie and three days later he fell right into it. He said that they had threatened him and his family and it’s not like he was giving up Harry Potter. Surely they understood, didn’t they? Ginny and Pansy, both of families in the Sacred Twenty-Eight, they must understand that one always put family first.

(Pansy’s parents had severed ties with her. Pansy had to spend summer with a lush old spinster aunt. The only relative that didn’t disavow her).

Ginevra Weasley came scarily close to becoming a murderer that day. She jinxed Ernie three times and then attempted to kill him with her own bared hands.

Not that it did any good. Hermione had been taken.

***

The news left Hogwarts and made their way to London and Diagon Alley. There was shock. Most were sorry. Some thought that she had brought it all over herself, being muggleborn and loud and a tad insolent, what with her pushing for species equality and participating in the riots in Hogwarts. When Fred heard he was sad, of course, and worried, and immediately thought that they should create something wonderful and name it after her. But George, George went to the bathroom to be
sick, and stayed there on his knees, crying, and could not eat a thing in a day and a half.

They were two courses apart, but he was only a year older than her, and he had never done or said anything because he knew she was Ron’s insofar as she could be considered anyone’s, but that didn’t change how he felt).

Molly Weasley cried in her kitchen and cursed herself for that year she believed the writings of Rita Skeeter and sent Hermione a miserable gift. She had been… She had been good this summer, hand’t she? When Hermione was with them. And during Christmas. But that seemed so weak and hollow at the moment.

And eventually the news slowly rolled to the Continent and then to the East of the Continent and Victor Krum gave an interview in the Glashatai condemning Voldemort, the first European celebrity to do so.

Because Krum spoke, the news appeared in The Prophet. Grimmauld Place hadn’t been so quiet since the night they arrived there.

***

Meanwhile, Hermione was still alive.

She was also right. So horribly right. She wished she were wrong more often. They had come for her first (muggleborn, mudblood, and yet better at magic than any of them). They had come, and thanks to all the Gods and Souls in Purgatory, that she spared her parents this. She only had herself to thank for but still she was so, so, grateful that they would never know, that no one would have to go and tell them that they couldn’t even retrieve her body to bury. Or worse yet, that they did and then they would see her dead and bruised and mutilated.

It was a small thing, but it liberated a big part of her heart and her mind. It took that sorrow for her parents and left only the pain.

The thing about cruciatus, what makes it unforgivable is that it lingers. There are many other curses and spells that cause pain. Umbridge had used them. But the cruciatus stays with you once the wand is lifted. It is a pain that goes beyond the blood and the flesh, to the sinews and bones. A pain that buries itself there and sinks its claws and doesn’t let go, so that you always know, you always remember.

Hermione understood how someone could go mad with it even long after the curse stopped. She understood the fear it brought, the feeling that you would do anything, betray anyone, just for the promise that it would stop, and more than that, for the promise that it would not happen again.

She understood Ernie, even if she could not forgive him.

Bellatrix had learned restraint, which wasn’t a very good thing because it meant she was being slow and careful to drawn things out. After the first cruciatus Hermione had insulted and taunted her, hoping that it would make her so mad that she would kill her that instant. But she had seen right through it and promised that they would spend quite a lot of time together. She had smiled and kissed her cheek as she carved the word MUDBLOOD in Hermione’s left arm.

Hermione lost her sense of time. Eventually, someone dragged her down to a dungeon. Bellatrix had learned restraint but she was too mad to control herself with Hermione in the room.

The cell was cold. The stone floor was a relief to Hermione’s feverish flesh.
Bellatrix had undressed her soon after she started to torture her. She wanted to see. She took Hermione’s clothes with her own hands, slashing at them both with her wand and a knife.

And clothes… Here is the thing with clothes. You are born with a body and as soon as you can stand up you are taught that that body is shameful and no one should see it. This lesson is repeated so much that later in life when you are an adult you hide from your own body even when you are alone. To be naked is Shame and Shame is an emotion that takes over everything. Shame paralyzes. Shame is so big and so horrible that when you experience it your mind and soul can’t feel anything else, they can’t think of anything else, other than the wish to not be ashamed.

When you are naked, all you want is to be dressed again and to escape the Shame.

Pansy had read a lot about the topic. Said that to be scared of your nakedness was a chain.

Clothes… Here is the other thing with clothes: They are human. Only humans feel that shame, that need to hide under dress. To take someone’s clothes is to take their humanity. Animals are naked. Slaves are naked. House-elves are covered with rags, but never with proper garments.

Hermione had been undressed down to her undies. That was the other thing, of course, when you are a woman and you are in danger. There is always that extra threat. Hermione thought that Bellatrix let her keep her panties just so she could scare her even more with the possibility that eventually she would take that too.

To be honest, at this point she didn’t even care about that. There was just no space in her mind left.

***

Narcissa was the youngest of the three sisters and it seemed that by the time she was born, there was no courage or strength left for her. She was not like Andromeda and certainly not like Bella.

She had received the best education, doubly so after Andromeda’s scandal. Narcissa had learned about house honour and family loyalty and she had married the man her parents had indicated and counted herself lucky. Lucius Malfoy was more good-looking and richer than Rodolphus and together they made a lovely couple.

Narcissa was something more than a witch, she was a lady of society, so her education had gone well beyond Hogwarts. She had learned to play the piano and she had learned languages. This was most beneficial and probably the decisive factor why Lucius married her rather than Nott’s sister, or one of the Greengrass girls. It was a tradition that he lady of the house in Malfoy Manor spoke in a language other than English. It gave a certain charm to the household and the children grew bilingual. You never know when you will need to speak another language.

Narcissa spoke German and French and rather liked the first. She felt strong speaking German and she liked the feeling in her brain as she figured out the declination. You also had conjugation and agreement in French, but it was not quite the same. When she came to the house to meet Lucius’ parents they had looked at her favourably and asked her to say something in either language.

Lucius had vetoed German immediately. He said he didn’t like how her mouth looked as she spoke it and that she didn’t make it sound right, although it wasn’t clear what he meant by that. So he chose French and Narcissa spoke French from that moment on and that was the language D- learned.

She was not allowed to speak his name.

Narcissa knew she was weak. She had nothing. Sometimes she cursed herself because she was not able to protect her son. Sometimes she cursed herself because surely her weakness was what
corrupted him.

Perhaps is she had been allowed to teach him German. Perhaps then Draco would had been the son his father wanted. Harder and stronger and cruel.

The muggle girl, she was strong. Not that it mattered because Bellatrix was stronger and the girl would end up dead.

Narcissa did not feel sorry for the mudblood.

She did not.

Bella was stepping back, now. Panting and with a dazed and satisfied expression. She looked almost drunk.

Narcissa was weak. If she were strong, she would perhaps order that a house elf poisoned the girl and spared her the misery. But no, she shouldn’t, she wouldn’t. She said nothing as she saw them take her away.

***

Hermione started to feel cold. She had thought that it would make her numb, but the pain had barely lessened.

Hers wouldn’t be an easy death.

She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, but it didn’t help, just as the cold didn’t help. *Nothing* helped and she was cold and hungry and scared and in so much pain! Maybe she was crying, she couldn’t say.

She just wanted it to end already. To die and stop hurting. If there ever was a time for wandless, non verbal magic, this was it.

And then she opened her eyes and sat up and slapped herself in the cheek three times. Stupid, stupid, stupid Hermione! Giving up so easily, stupid! Wake up already and start to make sense!

Hadin’t she been the first student to master the non verbal spells in DADA class? Snape hadn’t given her any points because “we wouldn’t want to offend the political leaders” as he put it, the bastard, but he had been impressed. She had seen it.

Hadin’t she been witness to Harry, hopeless with a wand but leaking music around him? Hadn’t *she* performed wandless magic, before Hogwarts and before knowing she was a witch, even? She had mended her mother’s shawl, she had. And when she was eight in PE class and she had been so scared of the stupid vaulting horse exam. Hadn’t the horse suddenly broken a leg? It was the last week of classes, just before summer, and the teacher had had to grade them on something else.

And here she was, stupid, sitting and feeling sorry for herself instead of doing something about it.

After Hermione got her letter of acceptance in September, she spent the year reading and preparing. That included learning as much as she could about magic wands so she could choose sagely in the shop. Later it had seemed like a waste of time because the wand chose her. But knowledge is never a waste.

Mark this words: Knowledge is never a waste.
A wand is just an instrument to channel the wizard’s magic. It must have a magical core (Ollivander preferred phoenix feather, unicorn hair and dragon heartstring, but it wasn’t restricted to them) and a wood body. This is the ideal.

Hermione got up slowly and examined her cell. She was hardly the first occupant. There was no wood, but there was goblin hair and there was a bit of moss which technically was part of the Plantae kingdom and so practically a piece of wood given time and evolution. Hermione put the goblin hair in the moss and glued it all together with her blood.

It was not a wand. It was more like a soft paste squeezed into a vaguely resembling wand-shape. If any of the death eaters upstairs saw it, they would laugh.

It was not a wand. When she shook it, it caught on fire like a flare and burned the skin of Hermione’s right hand. It burned into smoke and ashes and non existence.

"WOOoosh", it went, as it disappeared.

(click)

But Hermione heard the door unlock.

***

As much as she wanted to bolt out of there running, Hermione had to go slow. She was in too much pain to run, for one. And she had to be careful.

Any time, at any moment, they could come for her. Any sound could alert them.

She kept her left arm over her chest. It was still bleeding a little bit, but she would not leave traces of blood on the floor if she pressed it agains her breast.

Half naked and injured, barefoot and cold, she climbed the stairs up.

***

Do you ever wonder how many times in your life you went through a test unaware of it? How many times you were close to disaster, to choosing wrong, without you knowing it?

It is a staple of fairy tales. As the hero escapes the castle of the monster, he comes across a choice. It can be a door, or a horse, or a statue, but if he chooses wrong, the monster will catch him.

Hermione came to a landing at the end of the stairs. A narrow dark corridor. To her left, the corridor ended soon after in a well lit room covered by a thick carpet. Hermione could see the shadows moving, indicating there was a fire. Someone had left a sky blue dressing gown draped over the corner of a divan.

She couldn’t see what was to the right of the corridor. It was too long and dark. All she had was a faint smell of food that hinted at the kitchens.

Were Hermione to choose the room to the left she would be able to cover her nakedness and warm her flesh in the fire and even get a small drink from the liquor cabinet before dying a gruesome death. The room was obviously empty, but for the magical portraits that would give her up.

But Hermione didn’t go left. She would have liked to, the room was very enticing. However, Hermione was so very used to controlling herself and to get what was needed rather than what she
wanted that she went right, to the kitchen, rightly guessing that if the manor was like any other manor in the world it would have a door outside through the kitchens. A door that more often that not was left open.

She chose right, and she would never know how close she came to choosing wrong.

***

Narcissa Malfoy did not have the strength to speak up. She could not face her demented sister and she certainly didn’t dare contradicting her dear husband, even when it was about disinheriting Draco and the prohibition to ever say his name or ask after him ever again.

She didn’t know that there could be strength in silence.

She had retired to the sewing room in the second floor. She found that she could not stand her sister’s presence at the moment and she wanted to be far away from the room where they had tortured the girl. Here, the floorboards were a different colour and the wallpaper was soft blue with white flowers. Here she didn’t see the blood stains over the dark polished wood of the floor, not unless she closed her eyes.

She did not feel sorry for the muggleborn girl, but she admired her strength.

After a while, the floorboards here started to remind her of the ones in the ballroom. This was hardly the first time someone was tortured and murdered in the house. It was quite silly to react like this and just another proof of Narcissa’s pathetic and feeble nature. Perhaps it was because the girl seemed so young.

She could not look at the floorboards and the stupid flowers in the walls felt as if they were seeping all of Narcissa’s strength. She looked through the window, then, to the half frozen ground. It was a cold night and it had been a cold week. There had been a bit of snow two days ago, although it didn’t last. If someone were to cross the garden to the treeline and the forest beyond, they would not leave footprints behind.

Narcissa watched in a daze as the muggleborn girl, hunched over and with both arms held close against her chest, made her way to the cover of the trees.

She did not have the strength to speak up, and so she watched her go in silence. What power silence held.

***

It was so cold.

There was such pain in her chest. As if a jellyfish had taken residence in her heart and its tentacles were dancing down her torso and up to her shoulders, stinging her flesh from the inside.

Hermione had never been very athletic. Very smart people rarely are because they spend more time in their brain than in their bodies and it takes them close to twenty years to outgrow their clumsiness and learn how their bodies work. Other than the first year flying lessons, there was no other physical class in Hogwarts and Hermione had been quite happy about that. It’s not like they didn’t get a workout climbing up and down the stairs from their tower to their classes in any case.

It hurt. Her chest, her arms, her legs.

As it often happens when there is pain, the I goes into hiding and it retreats to the safety of the mind.
This is a dangerous thing in very smart people. Their minds are so full that it is easy to lose the way in there. You go into hiding for too long, you may not make your way back.

But for now, hiding in her own head let Hermione walk through the forest. It let her forget the fever and the throbbing pain in the arm and the cramped and burning muscles.

She got to a stream. The water smelled clean and she was so thirsty, she remembered now being very thirsty. She hadn’t noticed before.

But…

Hermione suspected her education was lacking. Sure, she knew so, so, much about charms and transfigurations and potions and was the best student in the school. And yet.

She had first started to suspect with Harry, when he did things that all books said couldn’t be done. And when he got a subscription to that journal. Mostly, Harry wanted to track down the issues in which Lupin had written and reread his words, but there had been other articles and Hermione had read a few of them. More since Harry left, because reading the words he had underlined was a way to be close to the friend she had lost.

The articles were often ridiculously specific and specialized. They were often so theoretical as to become meaningless. Really, how much does it matter whether and old medieval witch meant to write pewter or tin? They are the same thing.

But they also hinted to a whole universe of which Hermione knew nothing. Sometimes it seemed as if everyone looked down on History of Magic or at best allowed for only one version of it, one in which wizards were always great and muggles were dumb and witches didn’t have much to say. And so they didn’t know their own origins and they didn’t know where their magical knowledge fit in the history of the world.

The waters of the stream were clean and inviting. Hermione vaguely remembered her childhood fairy tales. Muggle tales or perhaps wizarding tales that had fallen into the muggle world. They warned against eating and drinking in the lair of the enemy.

Had they seen something like this in class? Had there been mention of old magic? There had been a chapter or two in Herbology about household plants that captured those that entered uninvited. They focused so much on what individual wizards did, they had no idea of what witches managed as a group. What bigger magic you could get when combining small and silent efforts.

Just in case, Hermione didn’t kneel to drink.

This was the second trial Hermione passed today. She didn’t drink and she didn’t fall asleep there. She crossed the stream carefully, making sure her feet didn’t touch the water.

At some point she found a long branch and she picked it up to use as a cane. She thought then that her fingers ought to be blue. It was cold and she had been outside for a while. Her fingers should be blue and she shouldn’t be able to move. She should be shivering.

It was cold and it was night and Hermione was half naked bleeding from her left harm and with a long beech staff on her right hand. Was this like the old witches had moved, before the Romans’ arrival? Were they too immune to the cold?

Had they bled like her?

Had they been scared like her?
Hermione’s escape was discovered late in the night, when Rabastan Lestrange went down to the dungeons. He knew Bellatrix didn’t have her and so at first he thought someone else had stolen the girl, like he intended to do, to play for a little bit with her.

But no one had her and Bella searched all of the bedrooms swearing she would geld the man if she discovered someone had taken her prisoner, hers. They searched the house and then they searched the gardens. Narcissa watched from a low window as robes were hastily thrown over shoulders and someone opened the brooms’ shed. She had a mental tally of the hours gone, closer to five than to six. In five hours, with a straight course and a sure foot you could get to the other side of the forest and the Malfoy state. But you would need four more hours before arriving to the next village where you could find help.

There was Bella, and Rodolphus, and Rabastan, and both of the Averys. Lucius did not allow Rosier to spend the night in the house and Dolohov had gone to the northern countries to see if he could regain some of his lost prestige working there for their lord. It would be five against one, six if Lucius went with them although he didn’t seem very inclined to. With a bit of luck the girl would return to the house dead.

Not that Narcissa wanted her to die. Just… It would be so much better for her.

There was less trees and more patches of grass in the ground. She was coming near the end of the forest.

Hermione thought she would cry, or perhaps she was crying already. She had made it to the other end of the forest but when she looked up to the sky, to look at the stars and orient herself, she saw a patch of darkness dash over them. It was the silhouette of someone riding a broom.

Hermione was smart. Rather than running through open ground, she sought cover under the trees. She was brave. When one of the Lestrage flew just a few meters above her, she covered her mouth with her hand and she did not whimper, not a sound made.

They still found her. As insane as she was, Bellatrix was both powerful and intelligent. She casted Homenum Revelio two dozens times. Of course she found Hermione.

Hermione was smart and brave and powerful. The beech staff she had used as a cane somehow served her to cast protego against the sparkling red curse one of the Lestrage was throwing at her. She swung the staff against the next brother, too weakly to do much harm but enough that he had to veer with his broom and almost crashed into a tree.

She ran. She stopped two more curses and deflected another (didn’t even know you could change the course of a spell until she saw those boys in Little Whinging). But she was still a seventeen year old girl, thirsty and hungry and weakened by pain.

They were closing in, crowding.

She could not stop the next jinx.

Her whole body clamped, as in a seizure. She started to fall. Her body didn’t get to touch the ground. “I got her!”
The Maid, the Mother and the Crone are also known as the pagan Triple Goddess which represents the three stages of a woman’s life in terms of fertility. I love the idea of Bellatrix as a sterile woman because she would like to have a son to offer to Voldemort but she can’t give him one.
Draco dressed warmly and with tight clothes to avoid the sound of rustling fabric in the wind. He also put on Sirius’ jacket rather than a cloak. He combed his hair back carefully, he tried on seven pairs of gloves before settling for the ones that fitted best. He spent the better part of an hour pondering whether he ought to take the fire poker or the old Quidditch bat he had found with the brooms. The poker was too long, but the bat was too old and the wood felt brittle.

He had just decided on a switch that may or may not have been used to punish the house-elves (too ornate to tell) when Harry finally came tiptoeing to the backyard. He had a bag slung across his chest and was so focused on zipping up his coat in silence that he did not notice that Draco was standing there.

“Do you have your wand?” asked Draco “Good, let’s go, then.”

Harry yelped, jumped, did a double take while he stepped back and somehow managed to fall down on his ass.

Ah, the hero of the Wizarding world.

Of course Harry insisted adamantly that he should go alone. That it was too risky and Draco was underage and had no wand and what would happen to him if the deatheaters found him? He, the blood traitor child.

Draco took a deep breath, straightening to his full height. He was sure he was at least a finger taller than Harry.

“How come Weasley hasn’t attempted to strangle you at any point during these past years?” Draco said. The hypocrisy of this boy, really. “You don’t have to do everything alone, I am sure that one of your friends might have mentioned something on that respect.”

“But…”

“I am head of the Interhouse Solidarity Party, Potter, don’t make me give you a speech on union strength.”

Harry smiled at that. They used their surnames like other people use full names. It was all Harry and Draco when they were cooking and reading and taking naps. But then it became Potter and Malfoy when they had to say things like “Malfoy do you have a death wish, why would you poke that?” and “under what light could you possibly think that combination of garments was remotely acceptable, Potter?”, and on one memorable incident with a hat “I can’t believe we are godsiblings Potter!” which send Harry to the floor laughing from the ridiculousness of it.

At least Harry accepted defeat easily. He nodded his head and took the broom Draco offered him without arguing.
The brooms were… well, they were old and different. They had nothing of the sleek and elegant design of the Nimbus and the Firebolt. Draco insisted in having them take a few loops to get used to them and Harry agreed. They were big and tough and they felt sturdier than anything he had ever used. Harder to steer but with a lot of power in them. Hard to steer and hard to stop.

Then Draco pointed them West, to his family home. Harry did not ask if he was sure that Hermione would be there, he accepted it without question or comment.

Harry was a disastrous hapless wizard and it was a veritable mystery that he had gotten to this age alive. He was also unfailingly kind at the right times. Kind in the small moments and with small actions, like now. That he didn’t ask Draco if he was sure of his family involvement was a kindness, just as when he didn’t question his presence in Leeds.

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It took them a little over two hours of uninterrupted flight to get there. They flew in a line at first, Draco taking point and Harry behind, but after a while they ended flying side by side.

Harry had a memory. Back in the village there had been a man, probably a young man but to child Harry all adults were equally ageless in their adulthood state and twenty was the same as fifty. The man had a girlfriend who worked in a clinic two towns over and she took the bus there. But sometimes, perhaps when the man got out of work early or perhaps when it was sunny, Harry had no way to know, the man went to pick her up. He rode on his bike, a bit hunched and eyes straight ahead, and with his right hand he brought along his girlfriend’s bike. Harry wouldn’t have paid attention, but he had the memory of Remus stopping to see him go. Harry had been in his arms, he had probably tired himself out playing, and while Remus carried him he stopped and watched the man with the two bikes who on sunny days went to pick his girlfriend just for the pleasure of seeing her earlier and riding back with her.

Harry couldn’t say who had moved first, him or Draco. Just that they were flying side by side and that they had both extended an arm to grab the other’s broom.

He had had no idea. He wondered if people had seen it, if they had realized how similar they both were. The closest he had seen was Fred and George when they played as Beaters in the Gryffindor team and moved like one single entity. Draco and he had practically the same height and the same frame and they were both Seekers. Draco and he shared an understanding, a common grace when flying. They should had fallen from the brooms, so big and heavy, at the first gust of wind. But instead they were steering each other and moving with easy synchronicity like partners in a dance.

They would never have seen it, playing in rival teams. And there was no need for that kind of flying in Quidditch. But it was sort of easy and sort of nice, to fly intertwined in this manner as they approached Malfoy Manor and the dangers it housed.

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They flew like one and moved like one. Like one, they saw the dark figures circling in the sky and descending towards the tree line, like ravens falling over a corpse. They shared a look and they didn’t have to speak to know what they would do. Perhaps this was magic too, a magic so old and subtle no one had thought of teaching them about it.

They lifted their hands from each other’s brooms. Brooms so big and heavy. Tomorrow Draco would have purple bruises in his thighs, he could tell. Tonight, though, he descended like a medieval knight on a big war horse, bringing with him a rain of pine leaves. He used his momentum to turn around with such force that uncle Rabastan was thrown out of his broom and to the floor.
And Granger fell right into his arms.

Neat.

“I got her!” he called to Harry as he kicked the ground to take off. Handless, he would like to note. It is one thing to go handless when you are hovering in the air, but if you take off with no hands chances are you will find yourself with a face full of broom handle and a bloody nose. But Draco took of perfectly and even compensated for the added weight, gathering Granger towards him with his left arm. The right was holding the switch tightly and Draco hit an approaching wizard on the face with it. Perhaps one of the Averys, given how nasal his scream of pain was.

Harry stayed behind. Harry had a wand and was currently free of passengers, so it made sense that he would stay and try to keep them at bay to give Draco a decent head start.

He had survived the Dark Lord in the Triwizard Tournament. Draco didn’t have a clear picture of what happened, but he knew Harry had survived something. And he survived the fall with the Special Operators. Plus, Draco had seen him perform some really weird and powerful magic.

He said all this to himself in the few seconds that took to fly to the treetops, it didn’t help with the lump of tension in his throat.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” he heard Harry exclaim. Because yes. Why not? Five deatheaters, five adult wizards trained in the dark arts. Of course you should confront them with a first year basic spell.

He should have just given his wand to Draco. It wouldn’t be as good as his own, but at least Draco had enough sense to cast Stupefy.

Rabastan was coming after him. Draco turned and hit him with the switch. He could hear aunt Bella below screaming madly. Draco lashed again with the switch, drawing blood. Rabastan was flailing but Draco could see… He was a seeker, he was experienced in flying, he saw the movement before Rabastan himself. How he grabbed the handle of his broom intent of pushing back and away from Draco’s range. Once he did that, he could cast a spell, any spell and Draco would have no way to stop it and no cover.

The switch was hazel, which made for temperamental and emotional wands, and through the years it had soaked the blood and sweat and tears of dozens of magical creatures. A pain that now surged from the point of the rod in the form of a scream and a purple stream of tenuous light.

It hit Rabastan right in the chest. He barely got to keep his balance on the broom and he dropped his own wand.

Draco did a weird sound of triumph, too surprised and scared to get anything better that a goat’s bleat. He seemed to have accidentally swallowed the lump of tension that he had been carrying in his throat, which now took residence above his heart together with the timidly raising hope.

To be honest, he had accompanied Harry fully expecting his fall and death. If anything, he could offer to trade himself for Granger and he knew his father wouldn’t pass the opportunity to punish him. While his family was occupied doing so maybe Harry could take her and run away. Of course he had hoped that it wouldn’t be the case. But what a Slytherin hopes and what he plans for are often very different things. It was important that Draco had made peace with his decision before time, so it would be easier when the time came.

Now, however, it seemed like they might get away after all. And it better be the three of them because if Draco escaped with Granger she would insist on coming back to rescue Harry and then
they would be in the same situation all over again and Draco would rather not. Although at least *that* rescue would count with a decent witch to even the odds. Someone who wouldn’t cast *Wingardium Leviosa*, for all the hairs in Merlin’s beard!

He dared a look down. Harry was flying up, followed closely by three wizards. Not Bella though. Bella was still on the ground.

Bella was fighting her own robes. The, um, the hem. Harry must have been aiming at the hem when he casted *wingardium leviosa*. His aunt was exposed from the waist down, the robes having folded *up* in the abdomen, constricting her arms and covering her head completely. One would think her screams would be muffled under so much fabric.

Draco didn’t think much of his next actions. It had worked with Rabastan, so he simply pointed the switch down to the three wizards chasing Harry and wished.

It had worked against Rabastan, yes, and the three of them might make it out of here alive. Draco could count on one hand how many times in his life he had felt this happy. One would have been saying “no” to his father because, as painful as it was, it had been so freeing he had felt like he could fly. And then, living with Sirius and Remus and mad Harry and somehow realizing he was not completely alone in the world, those short summer months had been the best of his life even if he also did a lot of crying during them. Gosh, his birth*day*. What a wonderful day and how hard he cried.

He didn’t say the words. He could swear he didn’t even think them. But a patronus sprouted from the switch nevertheless. A big feline figure (a cat, is a cat everyone, no one dare say anything else it’s a cat!) that jumped down and trashed the three men.

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Harry ascended to Draco’s level and got a hold of his broom swiftly and naturally. They started to move. Not the fastest, these brooms, but once they got them going they wouldn’t stop easily either.

Draco’s patronus kept the wizards back for a little while. And wasn’t that marvellous? Harry could only spare three seconds of thought, but the brain can think a lot of stuff in three seconds. He thought that they had Hermione (thank to all the freaking gods, yes!) and that they were going to be fine and even though there was a war, they were going to win, and Harry would get rid of Voldemort and make sure everything were all right and there were cake in the end. And afterwards he would go back to living with Remus and possibly Severus, too, if he wanted to come. Surely he would want to be with Remus and him. Sirius could be there too, and Draco, although they would need a bigger house.

A big house with at least four bedrooms and it would be really nice and everybody would get along. And Harry had to make sure, this was important, please brain remember for the future, he had to make absolutely certain that he was there when Sirius discovered the shape of Draco’s patronus. Better yet, he would like to be the one to tell him, because Harry had the impression that once Sirius learned that Draco Malfoy’s patronus was a freaking *lion*, or rather, *a lioness*, he was going to have a laughing fit that would send him to the floor and forever wash the gloom of Azkaban away.

He was going to do that. For now, he was steering them East and looking over his shoulder. The patronus vanished soon after but it would still take the deatheaters a few seconds to gather themselves.

Rabastan, however, came up in a blast of curses and jinxes. He had been down looking for his wand when the patronus fell over the rest. He leaned over his broom and threw himself towards them at
“Draco, take your broom” said Harry. Draco threw him an indignant look because he was rather occupied, but he did it anyway. His left arm was still tight against Hermione’s limp body and he had to hold the switch with his mouth (which even now he could feel falling apart from the magic outburst) to hold the broom with his right hand.

But now Harry also had a hand free, both hands actually, because he stopped his broom and let Draco gain some distance. There was no way they would chase them when Harry was standing right there. He saw Rabastan snarl as Harry turned around and rummaged on his bag. He had read a fairy tale about this and not two years ago there had been a fascinating article discussing that specific piece of folklore in Magical Review. Mostly it said that, while possible, it was a type of transformation that required an incredible amount of power.

Harry was sure McGonagall would be able to pull it off. Maybe that’s why she always kept her hair in a tight bun. So she would have access to bobby pins.

In his hand, he was holding a comb. The good trusty comb that had survived the fall with him and multiple offensives at Harry’s hair. The very best, the ultimate comb.

Harry brought it to his lips and kissed it before throwing it in Rabastan’s direction. By the time it reached the wizard the comb had already grown to a hundredth times its size and the teeth were twisting and stretching. It hit Rabastan straight in the chest and he fell. His broom, a Moontrimmer model, flew past Harry and was lost in the night.

The fall didn’t kill Rabastan however because he was cushioned by his brother Rodolphus under him. Rodolphus managed to hold on to his broom while the swiftly growing mass of thorns fell over both of them and pushed them down. It was not quite as spectacular as the forest of thorns and needles in Sleeping Beauty but with a size of three houses and branches as thick as Harry, it was good enough to keep everyone pinned there for a while.

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Bella had returned to the house in such a state of fury that it took them a while to make out her words. They had to follow her back to the edge of the forest for anything to begin to make sense. Narcissa found with surprise that she was secretly pleased that the mudblood girl had escaped and that it was easy to hide her pleasure in her silence and the shadow of her husband.

“They came for her” snarled Bella. She had foam on her mouth and was gritting her teeth hard. Narcissa feared she would need a mediwizard later to look at her jawbone. “The abomination!”

“And who would that be?” asked Lucius calmly as he poked at one of the hard black branches with his cane.

“Hhharrry Pottrrr” answered Bella, more animal than human.

This got Lucius’ attention, as well it should.

“And you let him escape?”

Lucius didn’t like Bella. And Bella didn’t like anyone other than the Dark Lord. Narcissa stood there quietly while they tore each other apart with words. The… thorns, to give them a name, were kind of pretty to look at in a way, like gargantuan black lace.

But then, Bella trashed and sent a low blow.
“Yes, him! He came for her with the other one. The blood-traitor.” For some reason, she turned to look at Narcissa directly. “Your son.”

“I have no son” Narcissa said quickly and quietly. She had plenty of training to make it sound natural. If her voice wavered, no one would know why. They would all think it was shame.

Her boy. Her little boy.

“He hit me in the face!” called Rabastan from somewhere in the thick cage of thorns. They had been there for twenty minutes and they still couldn’t get a glimpse of him. All they knew is that he was upside down (he had complained loudly about it) and that he was in the vicinity of someone’s bottom (he had complained about that too).

“He hit me too!” came the nasal voice of the junior Avery.

Lucius cut the discussion short. It was shameful, five grown wizards defeated by two teenagers. One of them almost a squib and the other wandless.

Bella answered that Lucius should have been there and Lucius said something vaguely offensive. Narcissa turned her attention back to the mini forest of thorns. It looked like a plant but the material was hard and dead to the touch.

Snape arrived soon after, with the first lights of the morning. Called by Lucius, no doubt.

Narcissa had never liked him. There was something disgustingly oily about him. But Lucius liked him and he spoke with him and of him with an easy comradery, as if they had shared so many things. And Snape spoke— he spoke with such a beautiful voice that shouldn’t belong to someone like him. He didn’t deserve a voice so pleasant, like a musical instrument. He used words precisely and delicately and Narcissa hated, hated, that Lucius delighted in Snape’s words while she had to be silent.

She was not jealous of the women her husband visited, they were just bodies, after all. But she was jealous of that friendship. It was ridiculous because Lucius was better friends with Theodore Nott Sr. certainly he spent more time with him. But he did not speak with him as he did with Snape.

Snape looked at the snarling mass of thorns.

“When you called me, I did not expect that you needed my help with… gardening” he said, and his voice was like the velvet inside a rose’s petal.

“Can you remove it?” Lucius asked, easily ignoring what would have caused offense in anyone else’s mouth.

Snape extended a long pale finger to touch one of the branches. He poked at it with his nail. Snape’s hands were almost as meticulously manicured as Narcissa’s.

“A simple incendio should work.”

“There is people here!” cried Rabastan.

“And do you particularly care about them?”

In the end they had to use five different cutting and slashing curses to hack at the thick branches, as diffindo did very little beyond peeling the hard black crust. Snape claimed having to attend business in Hogwarts and left immediately after wishing them good luck and bowing to Bella, who hissed at
him. Perhaps this is why Lucius liked him so much.

They didn’t get to the core of the thorn forest until almost an hour before teatime. By then Rabastan, who had indeed been upside down, had passed out. Avery Jr. had been sick and his vomit had somehow gotten over everyone else, a fact of which they didn’t fail to inform them.

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Hermione drifted in between vigil and sleep before waking up completely. She was hurting terribly and she was in bed, a big bed with fluffy pillows and at least two duvets. She was still naked, but someone had bandaged her left arm.

Harry. That was Harry’s head and folded arms resting on the bed.

Hermione didn’t move, she didn’t say anything. This could be an illusion, some new torture conjured up by Bellatrix. She looked at the scene in silence, unmoving. The room was full of Gryffindor decoration and paraphernalia, just like one would expect if this were a mirage. There was also a small divan, a few steps behind Harry’s chair, currently occupied by Draco Malfoy whose neck would later complain about the posture, no doubt.

That was a bit more unexpected.

Harry woke soon after, and at his joyful exclamation that Hermione was awake so did Draco who wished her well and immediately excused himself from the room. He had a hand already pressing on the back of his neck.

Harry had quite a lot of experience with waking up confused and in pain in strange rooms, so he was very well prepared to give Hermione an abridged explanation of what had happened and where she was. Still, Hermione looked at him blinking slowly and almost uncomprehending. She felt as she were barely occupying her body, as if any second either the room or her would cease to exist.

“How do you have any questions?” said Harry. His hair was as messy as always, and maybe a bit longer. His eyes were the same green eyes. But she didn’t know, she didn’t…

“How real?” she said at last. How could she know if this was real? If she were dying and this were a hallucination of her mind, she wouldn’t mind. But is this a trick and she would later find herself back in that cell… If this was a trick and Harry’s face turned into Bellatrix’s and the bedroom gave way to that dreadful ballroom, she couldn’t take it, she couldn’t.

Harry was giving her a glass of water. He didn’t seem surprised in the least by her question. “I was the first person to learn about your family trip” he said, rising his brows to indicate what he meant by that. “The day you taught me how to make a braid. You and Ron helped me escape Hogwarts. Mmh… Nobody knows who managed to pull that prank on the twins the summer of the Quidditch championship, but I have always thought it was you, although everybody blamed Ginny and Bill. Oh, I know! On our first year in school we smuggled a baby dragon.”

“You what?” Draco said from the door. “No, actually, you know what? I don’t want to know. Make room, Harry. Granger, I have brought you soup.”

So he had. A big steamy bowl with a piece of bread next to it, all carefully arranged on a tray.

“I was just telling her stuff so she knows this is real and not an illusion or something.”

“Oh, I see. In that case: I don’t think anyone has ever mentioned this, but after eight pm Potter asks the weirdest questions and he is very insistent that an answer is provided. You must have endured
this, I am certain.”

“What? No I don’t” argued Harry who just two nights ago had poked Draco when he was falling asleep to ask if all planets rotated counter-clockwise or was it just Earth. “That is not true.” He added, honestly surprised and ignorant of this character trait.

“It kind of is, Harry” said Hermione, smiling despite how tired and in pain she was. When they went to the Quidditch World Cup Harry asked when was nail polish invented, how come they never saw baby pigeons, whether wizards from other countries used the same words for spells and who was more likely to get a tattoo Bill or Charlie. All in the same night.

She took the spoon and started to eat.

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It is one of the most unfair rules of life. You can create a lot of damage in just a second, but you can’t take it back in the same short interval. Healing takes a long amount of time.

Hermione went through the motions in a daze. Eat. Get dress. Go down to the kitchen. Undress. Bath. It wasn’t until she was clean and swaddled in thick warm clothes that it all came to her and she started to cry.

Draco abandoned the room so quickly it could be said he had managed wandless apparition. Harry stayed, though. Harry took her in his arms and didn’t shush her or made any of the noises you do to calm someone down, none of those “it’s all rights”. It was not, it was not all right at all. He let her cry and he hugged her close, which was exactly what Hermione needed. It was not all right but she had survived and one day she was going to be.

Draco ventured back in the kitchen well over an hour later. As soon as he timidly stepped in he was hugged by Hermione who, like everyone in Hogwarts, thought he might be dead or locked in a tower in a Greek island and Draco was a complete idiot for thinking Hermione wouldn’t be glad to see him no matter what had happened at the Manor, shut up and hug me back.

And Draco, who didn’t have much experience but who had gotten a crash course on hugging and physical affection this summer with Sirius, hugged Hermione tightly and tried to convey without words how glad he was that she too was alive. How glad that she could still look him in the eye.

It was close to five in the afternoon. They had spent much of the day sleeping, all three of them. Night-time rescues are tiring business. Now they found themselves with the usual discomfort after spending a whole night awake, when you are tired and half hungry and unsure of what to eat and whether you should go back to sleep or try to stay awake until night time so you won’t ruin your sleeping pattern.

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It never ends with the torture. The trauma, it never ends. Even when you escaped and you are out, (you are out!, you made it and your friends, your loyal mad friends came to your aid) even then, there are these things that remain, that remind you of what happened and bring you back to that moment when you lost ownership of yourself.

The boys hadn’t done much beyond bandaging her arm and putting her in a warm bed. Well Draco had scoured the library for every text on medimagic while Harry comforted her in the kitchen. But the thing is that Draco was wandless and Harry had zero confidence on what he could do with his wand and so it would be up to her to heal herself with Harry’s wand, which was extremely
temperamental and, much like Harry, insisted on doing its own thing.

It wasn’t fair, that Hermione would have to be the one checking her body, undoing Bellatrix’s harm. It wasn’t fair that she would have to take account of everything that had been done to her so soon after her escape.

Hermione’s body was covered by thin red raised lines, the result of that jinx she couldn’t stop. She was also bruised all over from her muscles spasming with the cruciatus. She couldn’t remove the bruises completely but she managed to turn the black and blue into a faint yellow and she significantly reduced the pain.

The arm was something else. Bellatrix had used a cursed knife and every attempt to close the wound with a healing charm only managed to reopen the scab. Harry said he had just the salve for that, he could prepare it in a jiffy, you will see, just let him grab some eggs. It would help with the natural healing process.

“If it is another of your Magical Review things- ”

“I do read other things, Draco.”

There was no need for both Hermione and Draco to give him such a look.

“It’s an adaptation from a common recipe. Werewolf injuries are cursed too and scar badly” said Harry as he moved around the kitchen taking eggs, oil and honey with an easiness and sureness they had never seen in Hogwarts. “I learned it from Severus, his version is better than the one they have in apothecaries anyway.”

It certainly helped to take the burning sensation away. Harry applied it and Draco, who had better hands, redressed the wound and tied the bandage.

And then Harry announced that he was going to try to make garlic soup, no he did not read it on Magical Review enough with that. This was from the books someone called Alphard had loaned Regulus.

“I wouldn’t mind if it were from Magical Review” Draco confided to Hermione. “He saw a recipe against darks spirits in there and the bathrooms are still cursed but the food was good.”

“The bathrooms are cursed?” asked Hermione with the bemusement and despondency such a question deserved. Of note, the misery in her tone wasn’t so much due to the toilet situation than to the fact that the boys had let it be so for who knew how long.

“Of course they are Granger, why do you think we take baths in the kitchen? Merlin you have no idea how much we need having an adult around here.”

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So they could do magic! That’s what Draco meant. An adult so they could do magic. Harry’s sass was enough, there was no need for Hermione to start too. They were fine. They had survived fine. They were eating their vegetables and everything.

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The main ingredient of the garlic soup turned out to be bread, although garlic was also featured
prominently. Harry was a bit unsure on its magical properties, if any, because Alphard Black made very liberal use of words like “amazing” and “charming.”

Alphard Black had been a nutjob and Harry loved the eccentric man to pieces. Given that his name had been burned from the family tree, together with some other clues in old letters, Harry had deduced that he was the same oddball uncle that helped Sirius economically when he left the house (thus meriting his burning in effigy) and later left him his considerable fortune. To Regulus, Alphard had bequeathed his collection of… let’s just call it his collection. Because there were books, diaries, music vinyl, funny clothes and assorted random small objects. Plus an umbrella.

Supposedly Regulus had been the straight Slytherin son the Blacks wanted. The one who joined Voldemort and got himself killed soon after with barely just time in between to become Draco’s godfather. But after sleeping in his room and wearing his clothes and reading his things, Harry was getting the impression that poor young Regulus was something more than all that. He had kept his uncle’s collection, for starters.

So they ate the soup whose recipe Alphard had brought from his travels through the south of Europe and Harry declared that obviously this kind of soup was sure to give you courage to attempt any adventure. Which they couldn’t really argue against because it was hot and spicy and precisely the kind of thing you could eat in winter and immediately think “I am going to climb that mountain” although the latter may be due to Harry’s insistence on following Alphard’s instructions to the letter, which called for a bottle of red wine to be shared on the table.

But in any case, it was a courageous soup and Harry would not accept any argument on the matter. To their surprise, Kreacher, who had remained silent and doubtful on how to feel about Hermione’s presence in the house, said that that’s was precisely what the Master used to say and it had been in fact his last meal before the Master went and…

“Sirius?”

“No master, not the master, the Master” said Kreacher.

“Oh, Regulus liked it too?” Harry had an uncanny ability to understand what Kreacher meant which was no small wonder. However, only Draco was able to phrase the orders in any way that the elf would follow. “Well, have some will you? No, don’t make that face, you know I will ask Draco to order you to eat the soup. Honestly, Kreacher, every time the same argument.”

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Having Hermione around meant they could do magic without fear of the Trace being activated. But of course they were all tired, dazed, scared and wandless in the case of those in which this mattered. Hermione had many things to tell them, and they in turn. They had to figure out a way to let people know Hermione wasn’t dead, and keep hiding, and think of how to fight back, and remove the blasted vampire from the second floor bathroom. They had many things to do and they could all wait until the next day. There was no rush to do any magic beyond the healing spells for Hermione.

(It would be nice learning to cast those in the next five minutes or so though, because they had bruises in their inner thighs from the ridiculously heavy brooms. A road of black and blue down from the groin to almost the knee. Of course neither of them dared asking Hermione to please cast the spell for them).

So what it meant, the most immediate consequence of Hermione’s presence, is that they got music back. This may seem like a small matter, but you can’t underestimate the healing power of music, the way a melody can speak to your soul and bring it away from the darkness.
They moved to the library and ceremoniously lowered the needle of the gramophone. There was some heated discussion over which piece deserved the honour of being heard first. Draco vetoed any of the traditional wizarding music, which limited their options significantly, and he came close to smashing and burning the vinyls. Hermione said in a tired voice that she did not care too much which made Harry all the more worried about the selection.

Harry had been there. Nothing as terrible as the ordeal Hermione had suffered, of course. But he had been before Voldemort and he had suffered the cruciatus and then there had been the incident Harry didn’t think about, ever, because it terrified him like few things in this life did. (Since he didn’t think about it, it didn’t really count, and therefore his experience was hardly the nightmare Hermione had gone through). But all the same, Harry’s point was: He understood, he had gone through something similar and he knew they needed the right kind of music to wash away the experience.

“What about this?” said Draco holding one of the pieces from Alphard’s collection. The letters in the cover announced in what had once been riotous colours, now faded, that it was a magnificent selection of coplas, whatever that was. There was a woman holding a fan and a carnation in the cover.

“Yes, all right” said Harry. Alphard had written in the cover that the music had made him nostalgic of a place he didn’t know. And below a different hand, probably Regulus’, had simply written yes.

It was the perfect combination between lively and sorrowful. You can’t listen to something cheery when you are really down, just like Neville had known that Cheering Charms were of no use for grief. It feels empty and hollow and like you are listening to something directed to someone else, like you are intercepting someone’s message. But you can’t listen to sadness, either, not for long.

This was upbeat while keeping a mournful flavour that acknowledged some secret misery. This was a music that spoke of determination, of life in hard places taking root and refusing to be trodden. And perhaps it was the music and perhaps it was Harry, who always reacted so strongly and whose magic was tied to his emotions, but they all felt the stinging satisfaction from a good cry. The aching relief.

***

They had put Hermione on Draco’s bedroom, Sirius’ bedroom, guessing that the décor would be more pleasant than the one in Regulus’ room. The house had bedrooms to spare but this one was open and had blankets and at the time, when they returned with an unconscious Hermione, their priority was to heal her and get her in a warm bed, not getting another bedroom ready.

Hermione was exhausted despite having spent most of the day sleeping. Harry and Draco were bone tired too. Soon after an early dinner they trudged up the stairs and back to the bedrooms and Draco followed Harry to Regulus’ room. These days they slept in the same bed more often than not, it was just a matter of which bed they felt like sharing. The house was too big and empty and the sound of another breath besides your own was reassuring. After changing to their pyjamas (which weren’t pyjamas to begin with, just some random soft sport clothes that had been declared to be adequate sleep wear; the house was too cold to sleep with a mere layer of silk), Draco took his book and two pillows and went back to Sirius’ room.

“Draco, what are you doing?”

“She can’t sleep alone!” said Draco as if Harry were failing to see something painfully obvious. “She will have nightmares.”

“She won’t w-”
But Draco was already marching in, after hearing the soft “yes?” that came after his knock. Of course Harry had to follow him.

“Now Granger, do you want to sleep between the two or us or shall we move the bed so you can sleep by the wall? I would offer to take the divan again but that was made with someone the size of Flitwick in mind.”

People often called Hermione a know-it-all, Draco did, Harry did (although more admiring that taunting), Ron did every single day of his life (a combination of bewilderment, annoyance, profound admiration and humorous tease, depending of the occasion), even Pansy did, reluctantly. Yet she now stared at Draco, with his knee length blue cotton sweater, completely speechless.

“I’m sorry” said Harry, already trying to drag Draco back. “He just thought you would like some company. He has spent too much time with Sirius, you know, and-”

“Actually, that doesn’t sound too bad.” Hermione said and Harry would pay money not to see such a devastating expression ever again. How tired and defeated Hermione looked. “But I don’t think th-”

“You will have nightmares” Draco said in that ridiculously confident tone of his. Harry hadn’t realized how much Draco tended to interrupt everyone, probably because he always did it with him and he was just used to it. But one day Harry was going to do something outrageous so Draco would let him finish a sentence. “We will be here. I must warn you, Harry speaks in his sleep and he hogs the blankets.”

“I don’t hog the blankets” argued Harry. The speaking part he could not fight because there was a Gryffindor dormitory who would surely magically apparate there the instant Harry tried to deny it. “It’s for protection. Draco kicks and punches.”

Hermione offered no comment about how exactly did they know this and instead had them push the bed to the corner. Nightmares would come, and tears, but it was easier to fall asleep when in a bed full of pillows and blankets and two mad wonderful wizards between her and the door.

People could perhaps find this erotic but Draco would scoff and Harry might attempt to punch the unfortunate person who made such a comment. Because Hermione had been tortured the day before and this was about bringing her peace and support, have some decency random person. Plus Draco was indeed wearing a knee high sweater proclaiming his fondness for the Kenmare Kestrels, and pink socks, and if he were to attempt any seduction dressed in that manner the sheer idiocy of the act would summon his current godfather who would demand to know what was wrong with Draco. Harry, who was donning a Montrose Magpie sweater and trousers ensemble, looked slightly better but just barely.

***

Severus wished he could tell them. He couldn’t, though. He lived with so many secrets and lies it was hard to keep track of all of them. Silence was easier.

Still, he whished he could tell them about the three little children, the pureblood, the halfblood (sort of), and the muggleborn. The three little children who were not dead. But the news would eventually be tracked back to him. Severus didn’t care about what the Dark Lord would say because these days he found it rather easy to manipulate him. But Bellatrix would be furious at the publication of her failure and Lucius would be displeased. As much pleasure as that idea brought him, Bella made for a terrible enemy and Lucius was still a useful ally no matter how repugnant Severus found him now.

But if he were to find a way to leak the news… Severus thought it would bring back the years
Minerva seemed to have lost in just a night. She had taken the disappearance of the girl harder than any other news of the war. Harder even than the night when they all thought Harry had died when he fell from his broom. They all thought he had died and yet they all expected a miracle because it was Harry Potter The Boy Who Lived. The boy who sent Voldemort away at age eleven (and ten months). But they didn’t have the same hopes for Hermione Granger and Severus was so very glad that everyone had underestimated her. To date, the people at the manor hadn’t figured out how exactly she escaped from her cell.

***

Back in Grimmauld Place they had a similar thought. Although Severus, who so finely chose his words, would not approve of the phrasing.

“Messrs H.J. Potter and D. L. Malfoy” read Draco “are pleased to announce to all interested parties—really, Harry, this reads like a wedding invitation.”

“You said the previous one was too informal” said Harry who was still clutching his first draft. He rather liked it.

“Mmngwhat are you doing.”

“Hey Hermione” Harry pushed two pillows away to find a shoulder he could squeeze. “Good morning.”

“Ngh.”

“We were thinking that we ought to let people know you are all right. You have no idea how upset everyone is.”

“Your ex-boyfriend basically declared war all by himself.” Draco informed.

This convinced Hermione that she should at least sit up because at the moment she couldn’t even remember ever having a boyfriend, let alone one with an army. The bed was full of papers plus the newest edition of The Prophet which had conspicuously no mention of Hermione whatsoever. Draco said this was probably better than the opposite, because he doubted they would have anything good to say of her under Thicknesse’s government. Hermione pushed her hair out of the way and took Harry’s draft of a public statement.

“Ahaahaha! Up yours, Bella!” she read “Really, Harry?”

“I think it is beautifully concise.”

“Hermione safe and sound, not dead at all. Ahaahaha! Up yours Bella, I hope you sit on a cactus” read Hermione one more time.

“I speak from the heart” said Harry. He had drawn a crude representation to illustrate his point.

His second version, while more formal, kept the same essence.

“Miss Hermione Jean Granger is safe and sound at an undisclosed location” read Draco. “Mister Potter wishes to express his satisfaction and his hope that Mrs B. Lestrange eats a rotten egg and dies. Mister Malfoy concurs and extends this wish to the rest of the family. I like it.”

***
There was, of course, the not so small matter of how to send the message. They couldn’t risk having the message intercepted and traced back to their location, which is why they also couldn’t have Kreacher hand it. If someone recognized the house-elf, they would be done. Harry wanted to send it to *The Prophet* but had to accept that they would not print it in the Society section, no matter how absolutely funny that would be. *The Quibbler* would, but Hermione refused because she didn’t want to bring any more problems to Luna’s father.

“Well, let’s just find an owl and send it to Ron in Hogwarts” Harry decided.

“We have no owl.”

“Yes, let’s find one.”

“Harry, we can’t just go to *The Leaky Cauldron* or any other pub and ask for an owl. I think they will know our faces.”

“I know that!” He was the veteran renegade here, even if he had only been missing for about a week more than Draco. “We will pick an owl somewhere else.”

“I think I’m going to need breakfast before this conversation continues” said Draco. “Come on, Granger. This is like the Gaump exception all over again.”

“What does have to do with anything? And you can call me Hermione.”

***

“I didn’t know that” said Harry licking some butter from his lips. Kreacher had been providing breakfast for the last few weeks and it was always excellent. There had been a couple of minutes of tension when he almost refused to serve Hermione but she gave him a version of the famous kitchen speech that made the Hogwarts elves strike and afterwards Kreacher gave her a tray of croissants.

It was unclear whether this was good or bad, because Harry and Draco had eggs and sausages, but it certainly wasn’t Bad with capitals.

Draco exchanged a look with Hermione that said he had been right about needing breakfast.

“Well, of course Harry! Owls are wild animals. For them to accept humans and deliver letters they had to be trained from the egg and fed an enthralling potion for the first ninety days after hatching. Plus all the charms so they will be able to find people.”

“Ah.”

“It was in our *Care for Magical Creatures* book.”

“We had a book in that class?”

Both Hermione and Draco took a long drink of their tea. These are the kind of words that are better received with food on your stomach.

“Maybe that’s why Professor Grubbly-Plank didn’t like me” mused Harry, hero of the wizarding world and their last hope against Voldemort.

In any case, as Hermione patiently explained because this wasn’t the first time she confronted Harry’s obliviousness, only magical owls would deliver letters and they couldn’t risk going out to get one.
Harry nodded at her words. “Corn kernels” he said.

Had Ron been there, he would have been able to tell them that Harry had gotten that absent expression that betrayed one of his usual leaps of thought. But then again, Ron never gave warning.

“Kreacher, could I have some more bacon?” called Draco.

***

They had been careful, Harry and Draco. Despite their young age and certain impulsiveness of character (“Why are you looking at me? Harry is the mad I-will-fight-you one,” “Draco, you broke your wand just to prove a point”) they understood very well that they could not afford to take risks. Caution and restraint were more important than any spell, that’s what Remus repeated again and again. Think well and consider everything before acting.

Flying to get Hermione didn’t count because it was Hermione. And they were armed, so that wasn’t at all irresponsible. Harry was already preparing his excuses for his eventual reuniting with Remus.

But now was different, now they had Hermione to hide their Trace. Now they could step out of the house which they hadn’t done since the week they arrived there.

“Coo, yes, hello” said Harry as he threw the crumbs and corn kernels. “Aren’t you pretty? I like your purple collar.”

***

Ron ate his dinner mechanically. He had always enjoyed food, thought it was one of life’s greatest pleasures, yet lately he found little comfort in it and after last week and Hermione… He wished he could force himself to enjoy it because Merlin knew he and everyone else needed to cling to whatever little good things remained. But he just couldn’t, he couldn’t. He ate because he had to and because they told him to and although it still tasted good, and he could feel it, he could tell that it was good, Ron couldn’t enjoy it at all.

Lavender Brown was sitting to his right in silence, poking at her mashed potatoes with disinterest. She had tried to comfort him, been really good and really nice to Ron, but really the only one who came even close to offer any measure of comfort was Neville. He had a way to take the pain and the grief and squeeze it into a ball that lived by your shoulders. You still had to carry the grief with you, but it allowed you to move and go on with your life and get things done. Before that, Ron had felt like he just couldn’t move from the floor, like he was made of stone or sand and would never get up. McGonagall had had to excuse Neville from attending his classes for the next two days and he had spent that time comforting students. Not all of them were crying for Hermione, he said, or not exclusively. She was just the most visible example of all the bad things that were happening and that were going to happen.

Luna was sitting with Neville, in front of Ron, talking softly to a second year Slytherin boy because she too had a way to push you out of the sorrow that would otherwise engulf and drown you. Not everything had gone back to the way it was in Hogwarts. The point system was back, absurd as it was, but the house division had been broken forever. The tables in the Great Hall were just tables now.

“Coo” said a pigeon, the first pigeon. It was the typical grey pigeon, with two stripes of black on the tail and a collar of green and purple. It had landed between the salad bowl and the tray of potatoes.
“Coooo!” said a second pigeon. This one had more purple than green in her chest.

“Cooo” “Coooooo” “CooOOOoo” said pigeons number three, four and five.

“Ron, I think they have come for you” said Luna not excited, exactly, but with a wondering tone. As if suddenly being accosted by five, (“Cooo!”) actually six pigeons, were a thing to look forward to.

Pigeon number four was brown rather than grey. It began to poke at the roasted potato on Ron’s plate.

Ron moved his left arm, shooing them away.

“Cooool” “CooOOOOOo!” “Coo” “Coooo” “Coo Coo Coo” said the pigeons indignantly.

“Cocococo” added the brown one. They immediately pressed back and proceeded to climb on top of Ron’s plate and arm.

By then everybody was staring at him. It was the most interesting thing that had happened all week, and there is nothing threatening in a pigeon no matter how cheekily it invades your meal. It was something safe to pay attention to.

“Um, no, shoo” said Ron. “Go now.”

“Coo”, “Coo”, “Coo”, “Coo”, “Coo”, “Coo”.

“Ron, what.”

“I have no idea, Seamus. Ginny! Ginny come help your brother.”

“Maybe if you blast them away.”

“Don’t you dare hurting those pigeons, Ron!” warned Ginny from what used to be the Ravenclaw’s table.

“It wasn’t me! I didn’t even say anything” Ron yelled back. “Shoo!”

“CooOOOOooOOoOOooOoo” said pigeon number one.

“Coo”, agreed pigeon number three, possibly.

Ron tried to shoo them away, protect his plate and the rest of the food that the pigeons were exploring with interest, and achieve all this without merit a jinx from Ginny. He was not very successful. Pigeon number one stole a pea right from Ron’s fork, and Ron tried to push it away with his wand.

“I have explained it to them, but they keep dropping the letter” said a voice, Harry’s voice, emerging from the pigeon number one who was stealing a second pea. “Oh! Look. It’s like a recording of a message-”

The next few words were lost in the raucous tumult of voices. They knew they ought to be silent but no one could help screaming. The pigeons, as good city pigeons, ignored the commotion and went about their business of pecking at food and stepping over Ron’s arms. Multiple wands were produced to poke at the pigeons, but all they managed were some more indignant coos and a finger pecked.

They made silence. It took them a minute, but they made silence and they stopped pestering the pigeons. Probably because McGonagall had suddenly appeared before them. On a curious note,
Filch was there too. The rest of the professors remained at their table although they were all looking and listening attentively, but Filch had come as if drawn by the magnetism of any Weasley related disturbance.

Someone coughed. Ginny hit them with a *petrificus totalus* over her shoulder.

Ron touched the first pigeon lightly with his wand.

“I have explained it to them, but they keep dropping the letter. Oh! Look. It’s like a recording of a message. Hey Ron! It’s Harry.”

The pigeon looked at Ron proudly. Ron petted it with trembling hands and a marvelled expression until pigeon number two pushed it away to take its place. Lavender took the first pigeon in her hands and kissed its head softly. No one spoke. They wanted to, but no one spoke. They held hands, instead, and waited in silence.

Ron touched the pigeon number two. The one with more purple than green in the collar.

“…Limited capacity per pigeon, I think. Oh, shit, it has started again. Hey Ron. Sorry, I haven’t written more. We had to go into-”. But the message stopped there.

“That’s twenty five words” said Padma Patil, which awarded her with the right to hold the second pigeon.

By then there was so many people pressing against them that Ron could hardly lift his arm again. But he did, and very carefully touched the point of his wand to the puffy chest of pigeon number three, which was white and grey.

“Shit. We had to go into hiding after the duel in the Ministry” said Harry in a quick rush of words. Obviously he didn’t know if it was the length of the message or the number of words. “Anyway, Hermione is with us. She is fine, she’s barely hurt.”

There was a clamour. McGonagall started to cry and kissed a befuddled Filch on the cheek. There were dishes and cutlery and glasses dropped everywhere, and on the professor’s table Hagrid and Flitwick were crying, fused in a hug. Ron had to poke the bird three times before the words penetrated the barrier of white noise in his brain. Ginny picked up that pigeon and sat on Ron’s left side without a second thought for whoever had been sitting there (Dean, who had no problem being pushed by Ginny or having her sit in his lap). Hermione was like a sister for Ginny. The only other girl around her age in the Burrow.

There were three more pigeons strutting around the table. Still Ron had to take deep breaths and drink a glass of water before doing anything else. Luna had moved to sit on Neville’s lap to make room for someone else at the table. Katie Bell had pushed the pudding aside and was sitting cross-legged on the table.

“Come on, Weasley” called someone.

So Ron pocked the brown pigeon. The cheeky brown pigeon that had first stolen a potato from his plate.

“Tell him about Draco” said Hermione’s voice. Hermione who sounded urgent, like she always did when she was giving instructions. Hermione alive and speaking and it was just four words but it was enough because she was not screaming, she was not crying, she was telling Harry what to do, as always. “Ah, yes.” Harry went on “Draco is here, he is not dead at all. None of us is dead and we miss you all.”
Ron would have liked to keep that pigeon. He didn’t know if they were keeping pigeons but since everyone seemed to be holding one, he wanted to keep that one with Hermione’s voice and words in it, even if they were about Draco, that poor nice git. But Luna was quicker. Well, not quicker, but she rose from her seat and she took the bird in her hands with such gentleness that no one tried to fight her.

Hagrid used the pause to blow his nose noisily. After him, many followed although with much less potency.

The fifth pigeon had been steadily stuffing itself with corn. It was like the first one, a common grey pigeon with a black tail. Ron pocked it, feeling drained and out of emotions for the rest of the week. No more feelings until Monday, sorry. Whatever else happened, Ron couldn’t react to it. He was tired and grateful and all he could think about is that he was starting to feel hungry.

“We should have planned the words before starting to speak, this is ridiculous” said Draco’s voice. Somewhere in the crowd there was a big loud gasp from Gregory Goyle. “Tell them to keep fighting. There is strength in union! Don’t let-”

Ron had to touch the pigeon five times because the Slytherins plus all the other purebloods in the other houses were going crazy. They had been so sure! A fight broke between the Slytherin students over who got to hold the pigeon. Blaise and Pansy came to blows and it was all for nothing because the bird was snatched by Theodore Nott who passed it to a sobbing Goyle.

He really had thought that Draco had been killed.

The last pigeon would be Ron’s to keep. “-they work with everyone” came Draco’s surprised voice. “Don’t let them divide us!” he added. There was a short silence and then Hermione spoke again, earnest and so, so strong. “I’m okay, Ron, really. They are not going to win” she promised. Another pause, they must had been counting words just like they were doing now, and Harry said. “Out of corn. Love you, bye.”

“Love you too, mate” whispered Ron.

Chapter End Notes

This is quite ridiculously detailed for a back character who doesn’t even have any lines, but I imagine that Alphard Black travelled around Spain quite in the Hemmingway style and around the same time or a bit earlier. So Alphard got to see all the poetry and then the tragedy of the war and brought back with him all kind of Spanish things. It seems there are a few different soups and stews all named “garlic soup”. What I had in mind is the Spanish version which is something like liquid garlic bread with paprika/cayenne called “pimentón”. It is very good.

Same with the music. Before the fascist decided to make it a symbol of “national spirit” and almost the only allowed form of music, the “copla” was just a folkloric popular form of poetry. Coplas tend to always have a very tragic element in them. Chronologically Alphard wouldn’t be able to have heard the one I included, but I like the melody and is one of the few ones that talks about food!
On the third night Hermione announced she would be sleeping alone from now on because she didn’t want to become dependant and needed to overcome the trauma. But what she meant was that she wanted the bed all to herself. It was big and fluffy and full of pillows that they had donated and were not getting back.

Possibly, she had also come to realize that as good as the two boys were to deter nightmares, there was also a very high price to pay for having them there.

They went back to what used to be Regulus’ room.

“Is it weird that we are sleeping in the same bed?” asked Harry while carefully lowering himself on the tragically smaller than usual tower of pillows.

“It’s cold” said Draco with finality, burrowing deeper under the blankets.

It was. Although it was less cold as of late and less lonely. But on the other hand choosing another bedroom and making sure it was habitable seemed like such a bother! They had cleaned the house, it didn’t mean that it was automatically usable just because they had removed most of the immediate dangers. There was the smell of old air and naphthalene, for example.

Besides, when they were together they could also banter, which more likely than not was the true reason why Hermione had kicked them out.

“What do you think the colour blue tastes like?” asked Harry in the darkness.

“Blueberries.” Said Draco lighting quick. “Now go to sleep.”

“That actually makes a lot of sense. Thanks, Draco.”

See? Draco was good. Draco answered and put a quick end to the nonsense, as he called it. It was not at all like in the Gryffindor dormitory.

In the Gryffindor dormitory, when Harry found himself with a burning question to ask in the darkness, things were much different.

“Guys, are you awake?” Harry would ask.

Ron would pretend to be asleep, because he already dealt with Harry during the holidays and during the day and he had done his part, all right? So he feigned sleep hoping that then he would fall asleep before the madness started. “No!” Seamus would say, invariably followed by Dean snickering. “Yes, Harry, what do you need?” Neville would say, because Neville was soft and pure.

“How come centaurs don’t wear jackets? It has to get nippy in the forest.”

“For Merlin’s sake” The previously asleep Ron would cry before pressing a pillow over his head. Dean would laugh some more and Seamus would say something to the effect of hating Harry and begging him to shut up because it was a Tuesday night. “I have no idea” Neville would admit, knowing that the question would now haunt him. His mind taken over by the image of cardigan-
wearing centaurs.

So of course, since no one would offer adequate explanations, Harry would think up some theories (would centaurs be interested in scarves?) and Dean always, always, had to encourage him (Think: blazers!) and they would all lose an hour of sleep at the very least and Harry would still not be satisfied and in the morning everyone would be tired and grumpy.

But not with Draco. Draco was quick. Draco put Harry’s frenzied mind to rest. Draco told him that even in the top of a centaur was human-shaped they were too hairy to feel the cold and in any case the clothes would get ripped in the forest.

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They were good, those first three days. There was music and good food and healing. But Hermione wasn’t one for inaction. She had been trying to contact Harry for a while and now she had him before her, although through a rather unexpected route. She had to tell him, then, all she had learned about horcruxes.

***

“It’s not like I lied to them, I merely didn’t discuss it.” said Harry.

“Yes, master” answered Kreacher pleasantly.

“There is no reason to react like this, don’t you think?”

“Yes, master.”

“A man is entitled to keep his private affairs private.”

“Yes, master.”

“And frankly, I would expect this reaction of Hermione, she is really passionate. But I thought that Draco would take it better, he is quite self-controlled.”

“…”

“Yes?” prodded Harry while Kreacher appeared suddenly fascinated by his feet. “No?”

“Master Draco is a Malfoy and a Black, master” pointed Kreacher sagely.

Harry mulled over this point as it deserved.

“I thought Sirius might be a bit of an oddball, but he isn’t, isn’t he? He is just like everyone in the family.”

“Kreacher couldn’t possibly comment” said Kreacher shaking his head in a way that rather betrayed his words. Oh, the things he could say. “master” he added as an afterthought.

There was a loud thump on the door. “Harry! Come out this instant!” yelled Hermione. “I am going to kill you!”

“She is not really going to kill me” Harry said to Kreacher.

“Of course not, master.”
“It’s just that she is upset for my sake.”

“*master* is very fortunate.”

***

It had started like this.

Hermione called them to the library to talk. She had learned of a way to defeat Voldemort, she said. She didn’t know everything yet but she knew the essentials: Voldemort had made a horcrux.

“A what?” asked Harry. The word was so strange he thought he had spaced out.

“A horcrux, Harry. It is something in which you deposit a piece of your soul, extracted with dark magic. This is why he came back. As long as the horcrux remains intact he won’t be able to die.”

There are no words that can easily follow such announcement and so none of them said anything. After a while Harry rose from his seat and went to put some music to fill the silence. The first chords of some folk song came to fill the space of the library.

“Okay…” he said as he went back to his seat. “Okay. So… Does anyone else know about this?”

“No.”

“No? ’cause it feels like the kind of thing that should be public knowledge.”

“If the Dark Lord suspected that Dumbledore knows about it he would upgrade his security” pointed Draco. “Obviously he can’t be carrying the horcrux with him. He must have hidden it.”

“Oh, well. In that case”. Harry was taking it very well. The music helped.

“Actually…” Hermione started. “I discussed the topic with Dumbledore. He had been planning on telling you and, after you left, he thought that I could help.” She smiled faintly, trying not to show how deeply pleased and honoured she was that he had chosen to confide in her and made her help in the research. To know you had Dumbledore’s trust, to hear that he wanted your help, why, that was magical in a hundredth different ways. People rushed to do Dumbledore’s bidding because it felt so good to be able to help, to make him proud and satisfied with your work.

Harry was going to comment that, again, this kind of thing should had been mentioned earlier. How To Defeat The Murderous Dark Lord: A Guide. Perhaps not as soon as he stepped in Hogwarts, but definitely after Voldemort made his return, at any point during that mad year before Dumbledore’s deposition. But he didn’t get the chance to express his annoyance, because Hermione was speaking again.

“He thought that he might have made more than one.”

“What!?” exclaimed Draco as he jumped in his seat. “He ripped his soul apart *more than once*? Are you-” he stopped, mouth hanging open and eyes staring in the middle distance. “‘No, actually that makes a lot of sense. It hasn’t been done before and no one would think it even possible. But yes, of course. Once you have performed the terrible process of ripping and extracting a piece of your soul, why let the knowledge go to waste? Dear Merlin.”

With these last few words, Draco slumped down on the armchair. Draco took personal offense with many things.
“How many?” said Harry.

The way he spoke, it was terrible. Such calm and nonchalance… Here are these mysterious and highly guarded objects cursed with a piece of Voldemort’s soul. And he asked how many! As if the answer could make a difference. As if somehow there would be a number that could be considered “not too bad, that’s a low number of pieces of Voldemort’s soul to track down and destroy, once we are done let’s not forget to buy some milk.” The way Harry spoke, that perfect calm, it gave them goosebumps and put something cold and metallic in their stomachs.

“Actually, can they be destroyed?” said Harry. He blinked and removed his glasses and peered at the lenses which indeed were a bit dirty. “Answer that first. There must be a way to destroy them.”

“Yes.”

“Good!” Harry smiled, putting his glasses back after tapping them with his wand. “How many, then?”

“Dumbledore thinks he must have intended to make seven before he was stopped by… you.”

“Oh, for Merlin’s left nipple.” Draco continued his slump until only his head and upper back were resting on the armchair.

Seven. Which both Hermione and Draco, who had taken Arithmancy, informed him was a very powerful number. It was lower than forty two or god forbid seventy two, but still, Harry had thought that three was a reasonable number. Seven was a bit too much.

A horcrux could only be destroyed when it was damaged beyond magical repair, which didn’t do much to uplift the mood when one had spent years in a magical school and witnessed first hand how teachers and even prefects fixed almost everything. Nothing Seamus Finnigan or the Weasley twins ever did had let lasting damage.

“So, to summarize, there is an unknown, but probably lower than seven, number of cursed objects that contain Voldemort’s soul and that we expect are heavily guarded in addition to being nearly indestructible” said Harry. It helped if you tried to look at the problems coldly.

Other things helped too. Harry had the fortune of having learned of these things.

“What time is it? Surely it is near lunch time or dinner time or something.”

“What?”

“I am going to bake a cake” said Harry decisively, getting up from his armchair. Draco and Hermione followed because he had said cake and he had risen. “We can discuss the rest later. For now: cake.”

No one could find any fault with his reasoning.

Hermione and Draco kept talking about it, of course. But Harry had reached his limit of attention to spare. They went to the kitchen and while Hermione relayed all she had read on the topic and Draco, brilliant Draco, listened and nodded, Harry dove in the familiar magic of taking eggs and plain flour and transforming them into deliciousness.

Now that he thought about it, he should have proposed this as an alternative grading method to McGonagall. It was a transfiguration, after all, and she struck him as a woman who would enjoy crème brulee.
They had cake for breakfast the next day. However, the horcrux talk break only lasted until after lunch when once again they reconvened at the library. From what little was known of horcruxes, both Dumbledore and Hermione thought the diary had been one, and Dumbledore had found another, a ring, which he would destroy soon.

They had no idea what the other horcruxes could be. Something symbolic, they thought. Something meaningful for the man who used to be Tom Riddle. Something made with murder that carried a piece of Voldemort inside. Like the diary that took possession of Ginny. Like the cursed ring that almost took Dumbledore’s life. Dumbledore had some ideas but he hadn’t shared them with Hermione. He would, he said, in time; but he was very insistent that his was about Harry and Harry’s quest to fight Voldemort. He was the one the Dark Lord marked as his equal, the only one who could bring Voldemort’s death, as either must die at the hands of the other, for neither can live while the other survives. That’s what the prophecy said.

“Oh, no. No, no, no.”

Trust a Slytherin, and Draco in particular, to see the connections before anyone else. Trust him to see what ought to remain hidden.

“No, no, no, shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“Dr-”

“SHUT UP! You poison! You blight! You call yourself his friend?” Draco screamed, rising so fast that his chair fell down. “And you will go through with this? Dumbledore’s loyal pet, coming here and spinning his lies until it is too late. Such friend you are, spider.”

“Such friend I am? Of course” Hermione screamed back just as loud. “What’s the matter with you? Obviously Harry is the most interested in stopping Voldemort when he is going after him! Of course he will want to know about horcruxes. I don’t like it but this is how it is and I am trying to help!”

“Oh, yes, and it will be so neat! Have him pick up and destroy all the horcruxes-”

“Yes!!” Hermione said over him.

“Yes!-before killing himself!” finished Draco.

“Why would I-?” started to say Harry, who was completely lost and had no idea why everybody was suddenly yelling. He had been thinking about rabbits.

(He had been thinking about things that could be a horcrux, he wasn’t sure himself how he came to rabbits).

“What? Of course he won’t…” Hermione didn’t finish her sentence, only now hearing what Draco had said, only now starting to unravel his words. But of course, horcruxes were made with murder, and neither Voldemort nor Harry had died that night, but his parents did… She stared at Draco with huge eyes and a crushed expression at her sudden realization, a betrayal almost as big as Ernie’s.

“I just don’t see why I would do that” said Harry again, deeply confused. So he thought he might be immortal and was a bit worried about it, that didn’t mean he was about to test his theory trying to kill himself.

“Because you are a horcrux!” Draco yelled turning to Harry, too riled up to stop now. “For Merlin’s
sake Harry, you are a parslemouth! Voldemort made you into a horcrux that night, whether he
knows it or not. A soul that has been torn six times already, it must have been ragged and tattered.”
Draco waved his hands in the air, his words running out of his mouth at full speed. “And
Dumbledore knows, he has to know, the moment you spoke with that snake in second year he had to
have known. And he knew when he was sharing all this information with your friend.”

Draco kicked his fallen chair for emphasis. His chest was heaving and he was pale, paler than usual,
despite the red that came to his cheeks, as if he had sprouted shadows under his eyes just from
uttering those words. His blonde hair was tousled from his outburst. Behind the gray of his eyes
Harry thought he could see the gears of his brain still moving, thinking, thinking, picking not one but
each and every one of the threads and examining all the implications.

Hermione had covered her mouth in horror and her eyes were wet. That was the worse part. That
Draco’s quick thinking was supported by Hermione’s solid logic. If she agreed…

“A horcrux?” Harry whispered. An object with a piece of Voldemort’s soul that could only be
removed with tremendous magic, Hermione had said. Tremendous magic. Never mind the having-a-
piece-of-Voldemort’s-soul thing. It had to be removed through tremendous, absolute, terminal magic.

“Harry… I didn’t know, I swear I had no idea. I am so, so, sorry.” Hermione’s lips were white and
trembling. In fact all of her body was shaking.

“Oh my fucking god” said Harry as his knees buckled down “Yes! Please, thank you!”

Harry, despite his occasional tendency to physical violence and his perpetual sass, was not given to
cursing. Remus didn’t like children cursing and Severus considered it lazy when one could chose
more cutting words.

“Ffff—” said Harry from the floor having obviously exhausted his reserve of swearwords. “fffffuck,
yes, oh my god, Merlin and Morgana and everyone. I am so relieved! Hahaha! A horcrux!”

Draco, who had been horrified at himself for his insensitive outburst, now looked at Harry with
bulging eyes. He had been so angry at the deception! So angry and so scared for Harry. And then
there had been thirty seconds of absolute disgust at himself for his lack of self-control, for blurting
out such horrible news when his brain was telling him now that the sensible thing was to hide it from
Harry and find some other plan that didn’t involve the self-sacrificing idiot sacrificing himself. But
Harry was on the floor laughing and crying a little bit.

“I don’t think he understood” whispered Draco. Hermione hadn’t moved, both hands over her
mouth, slayed by the revelation and her own naiveté. She was now thinking back to those funny
words from Harry’s cousin and she saw why they had ringed discordantly then. But Dumbledore’s
words made such a sweet and all-encompassing melody, a music that took over all of your world,
and it had been too easy to ignore the alarm call, the ugly percussion in the background calling for
her attention.

Dudley had spoken as if Dumbledore were the one insisting Harry stayed at the Dursley’s. He spoke
as if Dumbledore were the one bringing him back when he had always seemed like an ally against
the cruel stubbornness of the Ministry. Hermione saw now, with that cold logic that could sometimes
be so cruel, what better way to gain Harry’s trust than to put him in pain just so he could later relieve
him? What better way indeed but to create a problem and then solve it? And Harry, he would be in
his debt, wouldn’t he? He would love him for that. He would listen to him.

It shouldn’t be possible but her hair had bristled. How sweetly she had listened to Dumbledore’s
words. How good it felt that he chose to trust her and honour her with this information. Hermione
felt sick in her stomach.

“A horcrux…” Harry was saying between laughter and sobs. “That’s why, oh my god, this is so great, I am not a dark wizard.”

Draco wanted to make a joke and say that he wasn’t even a plain wizard, but he felt as if he had thrown up his heart and his voice and they were now gathering dust in the library floor.

“This is excellent!”

“Harry?” called Hermione, barely lifting her hands from her mouth. Maybe there was something else they didn’t know. Maybe they had made something to Harry, some sort of charm to make him lose his senses and want to die after he heard the words.

“We need a snake! Hermione, you have to conjure a snake, but still, I am pretty sure I can’t speak parseltongue anymore. I am not a horcrux, not anymore, you see, not since…”

***

So this is how Harry ended up hiding with Kreacher in the kitchen. Because failing to share that he had been closer to death than previously thought meant that now his friends wanted to amend the situation. They were not going to kill him, despite their protestations. Harry knew it was quite the opposite, but they were both unexpectedly infuriated by his cavalier attitude towards his own murder almost two years ago, and they hadn’t even seen the scar in his chest. So Harry had thought it best to make a strategic retreat until they calmed down.

He was so happy! It made so much sense. He died, he got better, he was not destined to become a monster more powerful and cruel than Voldemort himself. He… was going to make cream puffs. Perhaps barricade the door first, because he could hear Hermione saying *alohomora* again and again even though she didn’t have a wand.

(Neither did Harry. They were so upset they couldn’t even think of looking for Harry’s wand in the bedroom).

At last Draco ordered Kreacher to open the door. Kreacher gave an apologetic look to Harry before complying because he had always liked Draco better and he always did what he wanted.

“Come on Kreacher, my man, my elf, don’t.”

The door opened. Harry was tackled and mauled by a furious Hermione, who alternated hugging him, kissing his cheek, and repeatedly hitting him in the chest, because how could you Harry Potter, how could you die and not tell us anything you moron.

Draco wasn’t much better. Draco looked like he wanted to strangle him. Instead he lifted Harry’s sweater (“Hey!”) to look at the horrible scar that covered his chest.

“You utter prat” he said, dropping the hem of the sweater before throwing his arms around Harry’s head.

“Look at it this way, we are already two horcruxes down and it is only Wednesday.”

“Aaaarhghhh” said Hermione, punching him in the arm. Draco still had Harry’s head locked between his arms and chest. Harry’s glasses were askew and he couldn’t see much beyond what he suspected was Draco’s clavicle. Very nice clavicle, by the way. It smelled nice. A hand was petting his hair and it was nice and grounding.
For a while no one said anything.

“People used to say that I would become a dark wizard” Harry confessed in a whisper. “That I would be greater than Voldemort. That I had mastered Death and would bring it upon this world.”

“Starting by releasing the animals used in Transfigurations. Don’t be dense, _Potter_, you are softer than custard.”

Harry laughed. So did Hermione, pressed as she was against his side.

“So I was thinking I should bake -”

“I want a cheesecake” said Hermione. “I don’t care if you don’t know how to make one. You are going to be making me cheesecakes for the rest of your life, Harry. How could you not say anything.”

Harry could point out that he had been in shock at first and then Dumbledore had imposed radio silence and then they had been at the Burrow and it was crowded and frankly Harry wasn’t about to discuss his possible Necromancer Supreme nature with Moody nearby.

Or he could look up the cookbooks and bake a cake and bask in the golden feeling of not being a monster and having people who would love him even if he were.

***

When they were in the wonderful haunted house everyone had their own bedroom even if they weren’t very big. Here they had spent more time than not sharing a room and a bed, but it had been in a time of cold when changing clothes was done at full speed because standing barefoot would chill you to the bone.

This is to say that it was completely understandable that Draco had missed Harry’s scar. Harry had months of hiding it from the Gryffindor bedroom, always changing shirts with his back to the room.

Not tonight, though. Tonight, although it was still cold, Draco came in front of Harry and gently grabbed his hands when he was about to put on his undershirt (Quidditch sweaters were warm, but you had to put on a softer shirt below to avoid chaffing). Draco gave him a tentative look asking silently for permission before pushing Harry’s hands down and away from his chest.

Harry had been so careful to keep the scar hidden… But it meant something else now, didn’t it? It was not the symbol of his future to come. He didn’t have to hide it anymore, not if he didn’t want to. He had no idea why Draco would want to look at it, though.

The bruised purple had faded long ago. The lines were now a faint dark red or a silvery white, depending on the light.

“It’s like a snowdrop” said Draco. He was tracing the line of one of the branches from Harry’s heart up, his little and ring fingers coming close to Harry’s nipple. Draco’s left hand was still grabbing both of Harry’s hands. Harry hadn’t noticed that before, that Draco was still taking his hands. They used to hold hands all the time and it meant nothing, it was just comfort and the warm reminder that there was someone else standing by your side. But now it was different and Harry didn’t know what it meant, only that his heart had vacated his chest and travelled down his arms to meet Draco’s warm hand.

“Did it hurt?” asked Draco softly. He was doing everything so softly.
“I… I don’t remember. I think it did, a little bit.”

Draco pressed his palm over Harry’s chest, his thumb right over his heart. Harry breathed and saw Draco’s hand move with his chest as his lungs expanded. Such physical proof that he was alive.

“He didn’t… Father didn’t mention any of this when he told us about Voldemort’s return. It was as if you hadn’t been there.”

“Oh, I was.”

“Yes.”

“And so was your father.”

“Yes.”

Draco took his hand away and Harry quickly got dressed. He had goosebumps in his skin and his hair was standing. Maybe it was cold or maybe it was the air suddenly charged with electricity.

“Draco” said Harry as they were getting in bed. Well, Harry was. Draco was standing by the dresser with a lost expression, his hand held open as if he didn’t dare closing it. “Draco.” Harry kept talking as if he didn’t need Draco to answer to know that he was listening. Draco often did. No, Draco always did. He listened and he answered.

“If everybody were animagi, what do you think they would be? I think Neville would be a pumpkin.”

Somehow Draco managed to look as if a layer of glass that had been standing between them had just broken and the shards quickly dissolved into sand. He looked at Harry, away, and then at Harry back again.

He started to answer before he gave his first step to the bed. Neville Longbottom couldn’t be a pumpkin because that was not an animal.

“But, like, an animated pumpkin that could shuffle around.” Harry moved side to side mimicking the imaginary animated pumpkin. “It would be so cool if people could turn into trees. Imagine a tree in the middle of a Hogwarts corridor.”

Draco imagined.

“Longbottom strikes me more as a hedgehog” he said.

“Ooh, yes! That’s good.”

***

“Draco.”

“Yes, I’m here” said Draco, face buried on his pillow.

“Chameleons are so weird. You would think they are made up creatures.”

“Yes.”

“Or like the result of a magical accident.”
“Mmh.”

“But they are not.”

“No.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I just thought, what if they were made by a wizard hundredths of years ago and they escaped and then it was too late to take them all back so we have had these magical creatures all this time and normal people knowing about them?”

“But it is not so.”

“Good, good. G’nigt.”

***

They still had much more to talk about the horcruxes, but for now they dropped the topic like a piece of red hot iron. Harry was still being consistently hit with cushions by the two of them, and threatened with sitting by and watching and not helping at all after relaying the information to numerous other people. (“Ron is going to kill you… Oh my god, Mrs. Weasley is going to cry at you.” “If you break Remus, I won’t forgive you. Sirius is gonna dunk you in a lake and I will watch.”) So it was a bit difficult to hold any serious discussion on the matter of horcruxes. (“Next he will tell us Longbottom is one, too”).

Plus, thinking about horcruxes also meant thinking about what Dumbledore knew and hadn’t said and what other things he might have known and chosen to keep for himself. It threatened to awake a black rage, something with a red head, long and coiled and ugly. Better to wait until the air in the house had cleared from all the emotions and tension. One of the walls in the main corridor had started to bleed and it was unclear who was responsible for it but it was obviously connected to their feelings of betrayal.

(Hermione. Harry was pretty sure it was her. Mostly because when he thought about Dumbledore and the things he didn’t say and the things he did, he could feel the air becoming colder and glass frosted, so the bleeding wall had to be Hermione).

Until then, there were many other things to do. The current topic of choice being bathrooms. Hermione was there, in all her glorious legal adulthood. It was time to deal with the bathrooms.

Hermione’s expression of horrified disbelief was absolutely hilarious. She had assumed they were exaggerating when they spoke of hair growing on the floor of the first floor bathroom. They were not. There was hair, thick and black, covering the tiles. It was just hair, they had poked it with a broom and thrown some crumbs on it to see if they were eaten and nothing happened. But no one wanted to step on it even with slippers. Even with heavy duty boots used for dragon training.

The good news were that the vampire situation in the second floor bathroom was summarily resolved. The bad news were that they couldn’t really say that they had removed the vampire from the room. Rather they, well, Draco, had changed its composition. What once was a single solid entity was now a multitude of liquid stains peppering the walls and floor. The shower curtain was ruined.

“I don’t think that was a vampire at all” said Hermione, who also couldn’t remember when were they supposed to have learned about them, but had studied the topic on her own. As soon as they opened the door a creature that seemed to be made of skin, bones, and vengeance, lunged at them, jaws open and long fingers extended.

Draco, still looking at his hands, said nothing. There had been a flash of red light and a SPLAT and
then the possibly-vampire was no more.

So for that night, anyone taking a bath would have to do it in the kitchen as usual.

***

Her left arm was still healing, a scab only just now starting to form over the deep gashes. The bruises had faded pretty well, but there were other matters in the aftermath. She slept and she ate and she refused to be stopped by the trauma, but she also avoided her reflection in the mirror especially when she was changing clothes because she just couldn’t stand the sight of her scarred body. The floorboards in the stairs and the corridor to their rooms were the wrong colour and whenever Hermione caught a glimpse of them she felt like she would throw up. She learned to walk with her head held high and sometimes with closed eyes and didn’t realize that the colour made her sick because it was the exact same one as the floorboards of the room where she had been tortured.

Some days Hermione felt determined and some days she felt like turning into a ball and crying and crying. It has been said before, healing takes so much more time and energy than hurting.

Harry helped. Harry helped immensely because he was a constant source of distraction who occasionally brought cake. Harry, despite his absurd belief that he could become an evil wizard, was gentle and kind and just being near him brought a quiet feeling of happiness. Because Harry knew about suffering, oh did he, but he knew even more about happiness and above anything else about the things that make life worth it. You may think that baking a cake or drawing a hot bath (with bubbles!) or stopping everything to wonder if other cultures called the Draco constellation differently, is not very important and too pedestrian, but then you may as well give up.

(Most cultures still saw a dragon, but Arabic astronomy had two hyenas attacking a baby camel protected by four bigger camels and in the background there were some nomads watching and Harry just couldn’t believe it, come on, you went from a dragon to a tableau full of people, he loved it).

Oddly, Draco helped too. Draco had been the one to guess she would have nightmares and the one to hold her hand when she woke in quiet terror that first night. (Harry had been dead to the world and completely useless, save for the funny image of a train made of blue smoke emerging from his temple circling the room and vanishing back in his head). Draco had been the one to find Hermione clothes to wear, comfortable and warm and pretty. And Draco had been the one to bring her a book of the library, and old collection of wizarding tales that as far as he remembered weren’t outrageously racist. Hermione felt as if there was something unsaid in that gift, something that they both recognized in each other but that they didn’t acknowledge in themselves. Something like living in the aftermath of pain.

Something like wishing to forget the same house.

***

Every morning they received *The Prophet*. Every morning they read about the world going crazy. The sports section was exclusively about Krum now, as if there were no other Quidditch teams or players, and it was nasty.

The horcrux quest was still there, hanging in the air, and they knew they had to do something about it. But it was still a very sore point. That ache was actually kind of helpful because the deception made all of them, and especially Hermione, want to know more, want to read and make sure they understood what they were doing and more importantly how to destroy a horcrux. There wasn’t that much literature on the topic but fortunately, this was the right house for that kind of research.
“Harry. Harry. Harry, are you awake? Harry!”

“For Salazar’s sake, woman” said Draco from under the blankets.

“What?”

“Don’t you knock?”

“Uh…” said Hermione “Harry?”

Hermione didn’t knock. It was one of the few faults of her character. She didn’t knock and she busted on the boy’s dorm constantly without announcing her presence first. For a few months in the fourth year (or the totality) Ron had been particularly agonizing about his appearance and he had started putting on cologne and brushing his hair before going to bed. Many times Neville slept dressed in his robes just in case.

Dean, who was turning into a handsome devil and he knew it, started going to bed bare-chested until they called him on it. He didn’t even want anything with Hermione, he was just hoping that she would carry a flattering description back to the girl’s dormitories.

“Harry, wake up”

“Mnnghuf” said Harry at last. Hermione was poking at every bulge she could see in the blankets. Half of them were Draco’s, who was squirming to a corner of the bed to get away from her fingers.

“It can’t be morning yet.” Moaned Harry “I refuse. Renegades don’t wake up this early.”

“It is still dark outside” said Draco in a resentful tone. Maybe he should start looking into getting his own bedroom. One in the second floor so he would have the now clean bathroom all to himself.

“Harry” pressed Hermione again.

“What.”

“What did you do with the basilisk?”

There was a telling and ominous silence from the blanket hill under which Harry hid.

“Harry” Hermione poked him repeatedly.

“I am asleep.”

“Harry.”

“Helga’s Hell, Potter. Is that what you were doing when I saw you whistling to the wall?” Draco was annoyingly smart and could stop being so at any point now.

“I have no idea what you are talking about. I am asleep and this is all a dream”. He tried to get the blankets to cover his head but Draco had an iron grip on them. He fished for a pillow and dragged it on top of his face.

“Ohmygod, Harry, I can’t believe you!” exclaimed Hermione who could in fact believe it very well since she had been the one to realize it. She believed it so well that she had had to jump from her bed and come get Harry’s denial or assertion.
“It promised not to eat any students any more!” Harry argued. On second thought, he should perhaps had mentioned the faculty body too to the Basilisk or some DADA teacher would end up petrified for sure, but mostly the Basilisk had agreed not to harm humans.

***

Hermione went back to her room and Harry and Draco both tried going back to sleep.

But falling asleep was hard and instead Harry found himself excruciatingly aware of Draco’s presence. The heat of his body, the movement of his chest, his breath, his heartbeat, the smell of his skin (gosh, that smell that was like honeysuckle), the sound of his hair against the pillow… Why was he noticing all this? Why now? Why couldn’t he just fall back asleep? The world was dark blue outside, almost black. Still at least an hour before sunrise. Harry had never liked sunrise. He would sleep until eleven every morning if he could.

Instead it felt as if a small basilisk of his own had come to stare at him and petrified him in the position they had been when Hermione left. Locked in a state of reverie in which you can’t sleep but you are not awake enough to tell your brain to stop thinking about that heartbeat next to yours and about the fact that judging by the rhythm of his breathing Draco wasn’t asleep either. He was just lying here, being Draco.

That long forgotten and ignored libido of Harry’s was now laughing on his face. “AHAHA HA HA!” the libido said. “Suffer, you sucker!” It was so loud Harry couldn’t even spare a thought to wonder how come Draco too was lying there quietly pretending to be asleep.

(Perhaps Draco was equally unable to sleep because he had loud thoughts of his own. Thoughts about how long Harry’s hair was, and how it curled and got everywhere and contrasted so beautifully against the sheets. Such hair! It was very nice and Draco would like to touch it. He had touched it, and braided it and attempted to brush it. But he would like to touch it now differently. Bury his hands and maybe let his thumbs rest on Harry’s cheekbones and, um, something else. He wasn’t sure of what, but something else).

They were both tired and groggy in the morning. Not Hermione though. She was not an early riser naturally but she tended to pack her mornings full of activity anyway.

***

Other than Voldemort’s, or rather, the Dark Wizard Formerly Known as Tom Marvolo Riddle’s weird obsession with Hogwarts, they didn’t have much on the hunt for horcruxes (which Draco had started to call horcruxi just to annoy Hermione). They could accept that maybe one of the horcruxes was hidden in Hogwarts, but no more than one and they had no idea of what it was.

It could be anything. Anything. Voldemort could have hidden his soul in a pebble or a knut and no one would ever find it. He could have put his soul in a parchment and then put the parchment inside any book in Hogwarts’ library and it would be safe forever.

He could. But he hadn’t.

“Harry, when was the last time you saw a wizard act with any semblance of logic?” said Hermione with her brows raised. Draco snorted with laughter. “You said it yourself, this man chose the name Lord Voldemort”. The way she pronounced it he could have chosen to call himself Mr. Evilpants Master of the Universe.

“He really isn’t a lord” said Harry tiredly. It was almost as annoying as people saying You-Know-
Who. He had no claim to the title.

“Riddle! Like, that is such a good surname. Who is this man? Oh, he is a riddle!” Hermione, it turned out, had her own grudges. “If he wanted to come as mysterious he had the name right there and he went with I am Lord Voldemort.”

“You know, Vol-de-mort means theft of death in French” said Draco “but it could also mean flight from death, flight as in flying not fleeing. I don’t, I really… That name is a disaster.”

Which came to prove that he had not made a horcrux out of a pebble that he would then drop in a forest somewhere. He would go for something with deep magic significance. What? They didn’t know. But Hermione had a good idea of who could know.

Bathilda Bagshot, magical scholar, author of A History of Hogwarts.

And as soon as they could figure out how to properly arm themselves, they were going to pay her a visit.

***

Hermione had lost her wand when she was taken.

Draco had broken it, something no one let him forget. (“So cool, Draco, so cool”).

And yet they had both inexplicably managed to make magic. They had both created their own wands, which begged the question of whether the feat could be repeated. If they wanted to go outside and learn more about horcruxes, if they wanted to have even a remote chance of finding and destroying them, they needed to have as many wands as thinking heads.

The problem, it turned out, wasn’t so much to create their home-made wands, but to make them durable. No matter how light the spell, it would take the wand with it, just as the Patronus had left Draco’s switch in shambles.

Draco waved the latest prototype with a doubtful expression. Absolutely nothing happened.

“Evanesco” he said, pointing at the newspaper they were using for practice. The paper remained, but the letters “t” vanished from it.

“E-van-es-co” he said one more time carefully enunciating each sound. The paper vanished, but so did the wand, a small piece of oak soaked in goblin firewhisky.

It was… all right? Certainly having a proper wand would be better, but there was much magic they simply couldn’t do wandless and this was kind of a solution. Disposable wands weren’t the first choice but they were something.

Hermione had a box in which she had started to drop magical things that she thought could be used for a wand. She was thinking about getting a staff, because twice now she had seen that you could deflect a spell with the right materials and you could also knock someone on the head with it.

***

Iola Black left the house in shame after falling in love with a muggle. Well, her mother thought she had left in shame when she kicked her out of the house in her nightgown the moment she learned of the affair. Iola, who had been born with great self-esteem and laughter in her mouth, shrugged it off and went to find her sweet Bob Hitchens. Bob didn’t even try to have any hanky-panky with her
even though she knocked on his door in the middle of the night wearing only a silk nightgown, he was that nice. They had a long and happy life together and Iola didn’t miss doing magic because her wonderful husband bought her a car and taught her how to drive and she was too busy becoming a female racer and mechanic.

Most of her things were burned and her father broke her wand himself since she didn’t take it when she was kicked out. She left behind some clothes, a few books (she was responsible for the erotic French novels in a corner in the library that had Draco flushing and getting interesting dreams), and a seamstress basket with rather nice yellow ribbons intertwined. There was pair of knitting needles in there. Long and sharp and made of silver and the moment Hermione touched one of them she abandoned all thoughts of a magic staff.

This would be more manageable in any case.

Hermione was all cold and hard logic. She had emotions, of course, she was human girl of course she had emotions, but she fought very hard not to let those emotions muddle her thinking. Hermione excelled in her classes because of her mind, and the few times she struggled with something (the patronus charm, flying in a broom) it was because it required a certain un harnessing of emotions that she did not feel comfortable with.

Silver is a funny material. It is inert, it is not organic like the materials that go in a wand. But there is something powerful in it and Hermione could feel the needle aching to become a conductor. Magical, yes, but also solid and durable and stable. Magical but also rational.

She needed something else, though. Something with punch like wand cores had. Only this was solid piece of silver so whatever she added, she would had to put it on the outside.

For now she practiced with the silver needle and she found that she could levitate some objects and even accio them. The day she finally managed a lumos the light was all white instead of blue and it looked as if she had captured the light of a diamond or a star. Draco said it was one of the prettiest things he had ever seen and then looked embarrassed about it. Harry was absolutely enthralled.

Draco, for his part, just made everything explode. He could do the magic just as usual (almost), but the wand would vanish in his hands. If he was lucky it would just vanish but many times its disappearance was more abrupt and according to him let his fingers smarting. Of course “wand” was a generous term. They were using anything in an elongated shape and all kind of materials.

And here is the thing, Draco got back the dragonhide gloves he had taken when they went to rescue Hermione and practiced with them and soon realized that they didn’t have to make them wand-shaped for the uh, wands, to work. He could just hold the materials in his hands and squeeze them together and he could cast a spell as smoothly as always.

He could even cast them non-verbally as demonstrated when he accidentally, totally not on purpose, lifted the front of Harry’s shirt from his chest and then as he realized what he was doing dropped it over Harry’s head.

“You look like a dementor” Draco told him, and fortunately Harry laughed and thought it was just a prank and Draco being playful. Ahaha.

(He stopped thinking about Harry’s bellybutton immediately, because it was just a bellybutton and he didn’t care about it. If the thought came back to his mind multiple times during the day, Draco couldn’t help it and he wasn’t responsible because personally he didn’t care at all).

Draco’s magic worked better, he discovered, if he held the “wand” on his fist and made the wand
movements, just as usual. He had to focus on where did he want to send the spell and that was hard, but they came with the same potency as with his old wand and that was amazing all in itself. Especially because they were running out of wooden things and he was down to practicing with sawdust and whatever remotely magical material he could find.

“Oooh! I know what you could use!” said Harry excitedly.

“What?”

“Like a, aa, umh, a” Harry was all flustered and getting rattled at not getting the words out. “With…” he said, mimicking a belt and a shoulder strap. “Hermione, you know, like a cowboy pang, pang.”

Hermione had dropped Divination on her third year, she had no idea what Harry was talking about.

“Yes! Come on. Muggles use it and you put” Harry mimicked putting multiple somethings on a belt. “And then you take them.”

“Oh, Oh! I know what you mean” she said at last.

“What?” asked Draco again, bemused and a bit annoyed that she knew what Harry was talking about. It was usually just him who could make sense of his ramblings.

“What’s the word?”

“I have no idea. But I know what you meant. In America, right?”

“Exactly.”

What they meant was that they could make Draco a bandolier with little pouches of magical materials hanging from it. Draco refused because he did not think he had the kind of chest to pull that look off, but of course Harry dug up some old Quidditch magazines from Sirius’ room (that, uh, were awfully concerned with the players’ physique, had they always been like that? Why was he just noticing this?) and they thought how to make him a cool looking harness or belt so he could have bags of ingredients with him. Kreacher was very helpful and provided the soft leather, and Draco remembered having seen some illustrations of pre-statue of secrecy wizards with something similar. Everything in the world has already been done.

***

“Harry?”

Harry was still awake, but he took a few seconds to answer because he wanted his voice to come out smooth and controlled rather than as a surprised squeak because he had been thinking that Draco smelled like honeysuckle and orchids and that if he were a taste, he would be lemon ice-cream. No, lemon gelato with a yellow and violet pansy on top.

(This was Harry’s brain at any given time, but in the evenings and nights it went into overdrive).

The thought brought a tingle to certain areas of his body. His belly. Yes, if he was thinking about smell and taste of course he should feel it in his belly, or somewhere nearby, and in his mouth and throat. That’s why he felt in his lips that phantom need to lick and bite.

“Yes.” He said, hopefully smooth and soft like the afore mentioned gelato.

“Did you really smuggle a dragon into Hogwarts?” Draco asked.
“Oh, no, no.”

“Ah.”

“It was out, we had to take it out of the school, obviously.”

“ Obviously.”

“Well, he was growing very fast, it was becoming dangerous having him there.”

“A baby dragon.” Draco said, turning under the sheets. Draco was made of flowers and all the perfume of Persia. “You had a baby dragon that you had to take out of school. No, wait, you were too angry then, it had to be someone else’s dragon. And I suppose Weasley helped you because he has a brother in dragon work.”

“Charlie, yeah. I didn’t think that you would remember him.”

“Of course I do. He is the only remotely interesting Weasley.”

“Bill is a professional curse-breaker!” said Harry, quick to defend Bill’s honour because Bill was nice and handsome and it is possible that Harry fancied him a little in a kind of abstract way. “He is cool and he has an earring.”

“Overdone and cliché.” Draco dismissed the thought quickly. “Sirius would agree. Was Hagrid keeping the dragon? It had to be him, who else would commit such an idiotic act.”

“That is very harsh Draco.”

“You insulted him” said Harry, but without heat because it was possible that under a certain light and from a certain perspective Hagrid were a tad irresponsible. Harry could admit that. Hagrid had made them work with dangerous creatures, after all (that fourth year with the blast-ended skrewts, for example). Not that they ever did anything to Harry, but even Ron and Hermione had been uncomfortable.

And Hagrid did try to keep a dragon in a wooden hut. A wooden hut made of wood.

Draco grumbled a bit more about the deficient state of security measures and adult supervision in Hogwarts before finally falling asleep. That night Harry dreamed of a petulant dragon living in an orchard full of lemon trees.

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“No.”

“But listen, I just need-”

“You want to go, you need a wand.” said Harry again, firmly.

“This is on the verge of becoming a wand” Hermione argued lifting her needle. She could do first and second year magic with it consistently. It was just the most advanced spells she was having trouble with. “And Draco is going wandless anyway.”

“Technically, I am going with multiple wands” said Draco without lifting his head from the book that had him so interested. Kreacher had finished embroidering the harness that morning, a beautiful piece
of dark leather with a dragon running across it. The elf understood very well the need to looked fashionable.

“Hermione: No. We are not going to Godric’s Gallow.”

“Godric’s Hollow” called Draco, still without moving.

“It’s too dangerous” Harry went on as if Draco hadn’t spoken. And look at it, Harry ‘Let’s bring Gilderoy Lockhart as backup’ Potter acting sensibly.

Since Harry was so insistent that Hermione should have a finished wand, one that allowed her to do magic beyond third year without exerting herself, they searched the library for inspiration. Sadly, the book “How to Strengthen your Wand” did not help at all and had in fact quite a misleading title. The worst part is that they didn’t figure it out until they reached page seventeen which had illustrations.

Harry wasn’t sure who had blushed more out of the three of them.

But Draco remembered something from his history books. Either in the one that talked about Morgause or the one about Soredamor of the red Hair. One of them, Soredamor or Morgause, kept in her possession a diary from an earlier witch (who may or may not be Morgana because the girls were right, History didn’t really record witches’ actions or even names right). Anyway, there was an excerpt of the diary with a curse to make a man’s heart break and throw him from his horse (Draco had thought it oddly specific, it only worked when the man in question was on a horseback), and just before that Draco was sure he had read something relevant to wand-making only at the time it was called “staff of power.”

At least, he was pretty sure it was about wands. He had thought so at the time, but it came just before the instructions about how to make a man keel over and die, so he certainly wasn’t sticking his neck on that.

Did anyone have better ideas? No?

It took them two and half days to find the damned paragraph and it turned out to be in a chapter about someone called Gwyar after all. It said:

*The black, the white, and the red shall giveth thee power untold if gathere’d as the Sun twice gives way to the Moon.*

*Has’t a pure maiden dress’d in green taketh the thorn and leaveth the bloom. Doth not speak nor cry to keep the power high.*

Isn’t is nice when authors give easy to follow instructions?

Actually it was kind of simple to follow once you realized this had been written by an English witch who never left the island nor did she expect her readers to go anywhere far to gather their resources. And it most definitely referred to a power that could be used in a staff or a wand and this was not a pun!

Draco found her a green dress in less than five minutes and Hermione picked the thorns in absolute silence at twilight in the night between Sunday and Monday. Really, the only trouble was the devil’s snare by the wall. Oh, yes, because the black and the red and the white, they all grew in that snarling mess of vegetation they called their “back garden”. It was actually very simple if you paid attention to the words. The key was in “thorn” and “bloom”.

Hermione had a tassel hanging from her needle wand. An off-yellow tassel pilfered from the same
seamstress basket from where Hermione got the needle to begin with.

But inside the tassel there were now three thorns, one from a blackberry bush, one from a rosebush and one from hawthorn which used to be called whitethorn in older times. (Harry provided the explanation for this last fact, something he felt he had known since before he learned to write). All three were common plants, but the blackberry fended ghosts and dark spirits, the rose gave you strength in battle and the whitethorn was a gate to the otherworld. Hermione put them inside the tassel and lo and behold she could cast *expecto patronum* now. She had made herself a wand.

Soon she would have to use it. They all would.

Chapter End Notes

This is a good place to rest, but if you want to go on that is fine too. No cliffhangers for a while.
Severus couldn’t keep staving Dumbledore off forever. The man was growing weaker everyday even if his mind was razor sharp. He was also, Severus knew, in quite a lot of pain.

They went for a walk through the grounds of the castle. Winter had been extremely cold this year so they walked while the sun was still up, even if starting to set, rather than at night which Severus thought would had been more fitting.

“I realize it is a difficult thing that I am asking” said Dumbledore.

“Depends on the person. I know of plenty who would find the task very simple.”

Bellatrix Lestrange. Remus J. Lupin. Sirius Black, probably

“Yet you seem reluctant.”

“It is, as you said, a lot. Asking a man to become a murderer.”

“But you must see, Severus, it wouldn’t be without reason. It will save the wizarding world a terrible blow and it will leave you in a good position to continue your mission.

“Ah, yes. My… mission.”

“I know you only see him as the son of your enemy, but I know Harry.” Dumbledore stopped to take a breath. He fatigued quickly these days. “He will come, when the time is right. He will come. He is honourable and brave.”

There was only the sound of birds as they fed on the little creatures that came with the night. Severus thought that he had never been this silent in his life.

“You must guide him, my friend” Dumbledore went on. “He will know of the horcruxes by now. But you must guide him… to the end.”

Some days, Severus thought he could kill Dumbledore right then. But he stopped, he always stopped. *Avada Kedrava* was a curse too quick and too easy. It was the curse that took Lily’s life. He could not…

“And you are confident that he will…” Severus mumbled to cover for his abstraction.

“He trusts me.” Dumbledore said simply. “He is brave. He will understand that it has to be done.”

And Severus used to think that James Potter was arrogant. What could he call this? This… *awful*, rotten certainty. This assuredness that Harry would walk to his death because Dumbledore said so. This… Oh. How right had Severus been. And how blind.
“You knew… even before the snake, you knew, didn’t you? You said it was for his protection, but when you let him with that family you knew he would grow suffering and he would love you all the more when he came to Hogwarts. The first wizard he ever met, the first person to treat him kindly.” The venom Severus put in the word first would be enough to dissolve rock.

“It is not… I did not plan for him to suffer, Severus. I do care for the boy.” Dumbledore said in the tone with which one would respond to someone was being silly and over dramatic. “I had to make an effort not to grow too attached to him, believe me. But he has a difficult path ahead of him, and it was better if he grew removed from the wizarding world and later he learned to trust me to be his guide.”

“His guide to the gallows.”

“To defeat Voldemort.”

“By dying.”

“Come on now, Severus.” And how dismissive Dumbledore sounded. Even in his agony he could afford that Gryffindor arrogance. That pride that said that he knew better than Severus the deatheater, Severus the traitor, Severus the naïve young boy who put his trust (and love) in the wrong person. Dumbledore knew better than him. “You know I wish there was any other way. And you of all people should understand, sometimes it is necessary to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the group. You are a spy, you face difficult choices every day.”

“Yes” answered Severus simply. “But I pride myself in stopping those choices from coming.”

“That you do.” Dumbledore stopped again to take a breath. He looked at the stars that were shyly starting to come to the sky, the world becoming blue and grey. His next words had the taste of honesty in them. “Some choices, however, become unavoidable. My dear Severus, how I wish it weren’t so.”

They should head back to the castle. Nights were still cold. But they both remained where they were, in the gentle slopes that took down to the lake.

“But he didn’t grow with the Dursleys” Severus said oh so careful to leave his voice free of any intonation. “He was taken.”

“Yes.”

Severus wavered. He wanted to know, he wanted to ask more.

“I regret deeply the harm that befell upon poor Remus.” Dumbledore said and Severus closed his eyes. “I never thought they would actually send him to Azkaban. He thought he was doing the right thing, I have no doubt, but it couldn’t be. He was doing more wrong than right. For the sacrifice Harry must make, he has to remain an orphan. If he had parents they would try to stop him and Voldemort would succeed.” They way he spoke, Dumbledore left no doubts at how horrible that future would be. “Or they wouldn’t be able to stop him because Harry is generous and brave. I have no doubt that once he knows and understands he will act accordingly. And they would have to see… In either case they would see him die, it’s unavoidable. Harry will die one way or another, better that it be saving the world, then. For neither can live while the other survives, I don’t know if you got to hear that part, Severus.”

Merlin, but Dumbledore was cruel.

“I just wanted to prevent that pain.” Dumbledore went on “Harry’s sacrifice is a hard one, but it is
worse to demand a father that he lay his child’s life.”

“True.”

So true. Better for Harry to grow up with people who wouldn’t care if he lived or died.

“So you see. He had to be taken away, for Remus’ sake if nothing else. And in the end Harry still learned to trust me, so it all worked out.”

“But Remus suffered” Severus said and instantly regretted it. He shouldn’t have said anything. He certainly shouldn’t have called him Remus instead of Lupin. “Although he is not Harry’s father” he added quickly to cover his blunder.

“No, of course not. But he thinks himself to be one. If only I had been able to intervene sooner, I could have prevented it.”

How dismissive! How… Oh, he couldn’t. He couldn’t. Caution be damned. Remus was the cautious one, anyway. Severus was paranoid and had murderous instincts.

“Actually, I find that he took on more of a mother’s role. More… nurturing.”

“pardon?”

Enjoy this moment, Severus Snape. It is not often that you get to see Albus Dumbledore puzzled.

“Remus.” He said, carefully enunciating the words. He said the name like caramel over coffee and milk. He said the name with respect and devotion. He put light on the word. “More of maternal role. A father on the other hand is a rather stern and distant figure, or so I am told by the ladies from the Committee for Witches’ Advancement. Did you think that Harry would grow without both?”

Was it Gryffindor courage or cowardice, that Dumbledore stared at him and said nothing?

“Severus…” Ah! There you had it.

“Fret not, Albus. I am not going to kill you” this time Severus spoke as if he had ice in his tongue. “I am going to sit by and watch you die. You don’t deserve a hero’s death. You took an innocent boy and put him in a bad home twice. Twice, Albus. All because you thought his death was the best option, the easiest option. All because his death was easier than finding an alternative. All because you know no one can love you on their own, so you had to fake the feeling, build it with his suffering.”

Severus stopped. He had started so calm and smooth, so cold, but he had grown angrier. Dumbledore was staring at him, his eyes sparkling and colour coming to his cheeks. But only that. A bit of red that could be anger or could be shame. No words to defend himself, no more words.

“You are going to die, Albus, but I am not going to kill you.” Severus relished those words. He relished the glimmer of fear he saw in Dumbledore’s ice-blue eyes. Just as blue as, what was his name? It was long ago, he had forgotten, the handsome DADA teacher who tried to kill that other child. Severus should had known then.

But Severus the traitor, Severus the death eater, wasn’t a cruel man. All he had done in his life, his rights and his wrongs, he had done for love.

He spoke again.
“I am not without mercy, I will put your mind at easy, Albus. Voldemort will fall and Harry will live. I am Slytherin, we can always find a third option.”

He turned around to leave. Dumbledore could find his own way back to the castle, or he could walk into the lake and drown for all he cared. He turned again, however, after less than ten steps. Severus was close to Lucius Malfoy, who was easily insulted and terribly vindictive. He knew how stupidly spiteful people could be.

He spoke over his shoulder. Smooth, sweet, like too sweet cocoa powder.

“Oh, and remember… as you yourself said. You need me in a good position to protect everybody. Try anything against me, against Remus, Sirius, anyone else… and I will tell Minerva of your plan. See what she thinks of Harry going to the Dursleys to suit your interests.”

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Percy was so incredibly tired that when he came home he couldn’t even undress. He couldn’t walk to his bed to fall asleep. He couldn’t even cry.

Helga Hufflepuff had been right. His was a heavy burden.

But you don’t get twelve OWLs like nothing. Percy, his brothers used to say, was the odd Weasley who should had been in Ravenclaw and ended up in Gryffindor instead.

(Bill had twelve OWLs too, but Bill was effortlessly brilliant, he didn’t count).

However, Percy was no Ravenclaw. He was more like a Hufflepuff, really. Percy was organized and he was driven. Percy had three different alibis prepared and his living room ready to accept an overnight guest even though he hadn’t had to bring anyone yet. Percy allotted himself ten minutes a day to break down and cry, and if he couldn’t do it then, because often he was too tired for tears, then he would have to wait until the next day because there was too much to do and those were the rules he had set for himself.

He rarely got more than two days of warning, two and half at the most. Which is why in the meantime he prepared for every eventuality and had dozens of excuses ready. Twice already he had saved his father’s life without deviating from his carefully constructed routine.

(And how could such a boring and meek man get in so much trouble for Merlin’s sake! Openly speaking for muggles and muggleborns and even standing up to freaking Eustachius Avery Senior.) But even if the saving itself was simple enough, Percy had to think beforehand and have a plan ready and that took so much energy. Really, no wonder Percy was tired.

This time the vision came with three and a half days of warning, at lunch time on a Thursday which gave him a blissfully free weekend to work with, and it still was too little time. Too little.

It would happen in between the late night and early morning of Sunday to Monday. It would be discovered an hour after sunrise. They would move before noon.

Percy had… He was in his office, he was at work, he had to keep cool. Keep cool, Percy, chill. He also had to warn his mother because of course the Burrow was bursting at the seams with people and they couldn’t just go, they needed somewhere else to hide. They needed time to find and prepare a second safehouse.

And so would the twins and Sirius and Remus, but theirs was a different case. The Burrow first. They had to empty it and they had to hide. And many other people whose future Percy couldn’t see
but Percy didn’t have to be a seer to know that they would have to run.

***

Silence in the Burrow was such an odd thing that the ghoul in the attic came downstairs to see what was going on.

Molly Weasley sat in her armchair, the old green and yellow thing with a burn mark from when Charlie was five. The armchair in which she knitted and drank tea.

She was white. Molly was not a woman faint of heart, and she was white and she was scared.

Most of the members of the Order were there. Not the ones from Hogwarts, but pretty much everyone else. They had been debating Galahad’s latest message telling them of a raid come Monday. Telling them to leave, abandon the house completely.

The thing is, how could they trust him? Nobody knew who it was. Galahad was just a name that had proved helpful in the past. That was not enough to dismantle their centre of operations.

The note had come in a big cream coloured envelope. In fact, the note was written inside the envelope, which they had to unfold to see. Inside the envelope itself there had been a second one, this time lilac.

They had argued who Galahad was and whether this message came from him at all. He had been active for months now and Moody suspected he was a spy because he seriously doubted anyone’s ability to remain undiscovered this long. Or at the very least the real Galahad had been found and killed and now a Ministry spy was taking his place trying to uncover the identities of the Order members. Shaklebolt thought they couldn’t afford not to listen. Ezequiel Smith started to speak, dropped two frogs from his mouth, and then scribbled that he also suspected the message. Mundungus Fletcher said the opinion of people who got themselves cursed and were still vomiting frogs shouldn’t even count. Smith tried to answer and dropped three more frogs that somehow managed to convey his message. The last one, big and fat, knocked over a vase before jumping out the window.

This was around the time Molly opened the lilac envelope and all colour fled from her face and she had to sit down.

“Ezequiel Smith drops a frog that knocks over Muriel’s vase” she read.

Everybody shut up at that. Everybody. Arthur, who had just arrived from work and still had his jacket on, went to Molly to hold her hand.

“A prophet.” Shaklebolt was the first to break the silence. He had nerves of steel that man. It was good having him there. “Or something very much like that.”

“Could he have charmed the paper so it would show something that recently happened in the room?” Moody thought aloud more than asked. “We can’t just trust him because of a parlour trick.”

“Jeez, Moody. Way to overthink it” called Tonks from the armchair that had become hers. More often than not lately she had been sporting light brown hair down to her shoulders and nobody knew if it was her natural hair or if she was just feeling down. She was still healing even if she was adamant to keep fighting. She looked pale and weak like a little bird in winter.

“What I would like to know is why this gentleman doesn’t come forwards to us” mused Elphias Doge. He was not a bad man, Doge was, but he liked Dumbledore too much and he was irritatingly
pompous.

“I think we might have to heed this warning, regardless of who Galahad is and what motivates him.” Shaklebolt spoke with such command that it was reassuring even when he admitted that things were about to go bad. He always sounded as if he had an idea of what exactly went wrong and therefore knew how to make it right. “After all, the note only speaks of an attack in this house. It’s not like it is telling us to go somewhere specific. We should at least consider moving certain people.”

“Kingsley, don’t you dare look at me.” Tonks said quickly. There was a faint shine of red in her hair.

“We have discussed this before. You have not been cleared for combat by the mediwizards.”

Fletcher snickered and then jumped at Tonks’ jinx. She was weak and ill and still working on regaining the blood she lost, but none of these was an obstacle for casting a curse. Especially if she was sitting.

“Maybe just for Monday” offered Arthur, who knew very well that his wife would fight leaving her house tooth and nail.

“I just wish we knew why is this man doing this” whispered Dedalus Diggle, nursing a mug of chamomile tea in his hands.

Nobody liked following the advice of a mysterious stranger.

And yet, every small tip so far had been useful.

And yet, as Moody pointed, that is how you gain someone’s trust so you can later betray them and have them all slaughtered. You give a little bit first before taking a lot.

There was a third envelope in Molly’s lap. “Won’t you open it, Molly?” asked sweet Emmeline Vance. A very powerful witch, mind you, but still so sweet and caring. People tended to argue less when she was in the room and the power of her spellwork was only half the reason for it.

Molly was still pale and her lips were pressed in a tight line, but her fingers didn’t tremble as she carefully unfolded the green paper.

_Something very much like that, Mr. Shacklebolt._

_I don’t know if that kind of charm is possible, but I am sure the twins would have the answer. I commend your dedication to scepticism in any case, Mr. Moody._

_A number of issues. We have common enemies and common goals, but we differ in the method, Mr. Doge._

_Miss Tonks, please, listen to the man. And may I suggest escorting your muggle father somewhere safe?_

_No. Not just for Monday. Until the end of the war, Mr. Weasley, I am sorry to say so._

_Why do I not let you be murdered by Rabastan Lestrange? I wonder that myself, Diggle._

_Are we done with the questions? Good._
If you don’t evacuate the house, you will be murdered by deatheaters and I will be most displeased. Don’t make me come get you, I really don’t have the time to spare.

“You all heard it” Shacklebolt said. Again his restraint took over the room and stopped the shock and the tears before they could even start. “Let’s get to work.”

Thank you, Mr. Shacklebolt. You really are a joy to work with.

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“Kreacher, come here” Harry called. “Try this and tell me what you think, more salt?”

The elf went. He hated when they cooked in the kitchen, but he still went to Harry’s call and took the offered spoon of stew. He was, like the house, like that boggart that left, defeated and conquered.

“Certainly not, master.”

“No?” Harry was surprised. “I would have thought a bit more.”

“Master Draco prefers less salt and more cumin, master.”

Harry laughed. “Oh, Kreacher, are you playing favourites?” he asked in mock anger. “I didn’t know you heart had room for anyone other than Regulus.”

“Master is very well regarded by Kreacher” the poor elf said instantly. Harry noticed, of course, that in these conversations they had in the kitchen day after day, the Mistress was never featured. The elf worried about what the Mistress would say, what she would think of the house and her descendants. But he didn’t love her, not one bit.

What a fascinating thing was a house-elf psyche. Harry understood them now just as little as the first day. He had simply become better at holding a conversation with them. Mostly because they were small and often abused and Harry couldn’t be anything but kind to small and often abused creatures.

He added a little bit more of salt, because damn Draco. But he also got the cumin down and sprinkled it over the lentils soup because, well.

Damn Draco.

“I guess Regulus and Draco are pretty similar” Harry said while he stired the soup. “Pureblood Slytherins supposed to follow Voldemort and make their families proud. I saw a photograph the other day, it seems like Regulus was a Seeker! So are Draco and I. But yes… Similar those two. Only Draco got out in time and Regulus didn’t and paid for it. Poor man.”

Poor child, killed by other deatheaters is what Sirius had said, not a fortnight after Draco’s christening. And Draco could had been just like him.

What a horrible thought.

Harry shook himself and took another spoonful. “Okay, try now Kreacher. Better?”

The elf tried the stew again, nodded, and then he started to speak.
“Oh my god, guys!” Harry exclaimed as he burst into the library. His eyes were still a bit red from crying because, wow, way to be blindsided with a story. Poor, poor, Kreacher and poor Regulus, too. He had to go retrieve his body. Not now, because he had other things to do first, but it was going in his to-do list. “You are not going to believe what I just-”

“Harry!” called Hermione. Her brows were doing that thing that meant bad news. She and Draco had been practicing their spellwork with their new wands, but the pillows and cups they used for targets were now abandoned, scattered around the room, and they were both bending over the paper.

“What?” Harry demanded. What could be more important than his news. Now that he thought about it, what could be so important that it merited a special edition of *The Prophet*.

“Dumbledore is dead” said Draco. He sounded hollow, like he did when there was a crisis and he was pushing down his emotions for later, trying to keep a cool head to think and getting somewhere in the vicinity of glacial.

“Okay, yours is bigger.”

Dumbledore’s death was so important, so full of consequences, that the death itself became irrelevant. What was important was this new Dumbledore-less reality, not how he died.

They said he had died of old age.

They said that the master potioner in Hogwarts had poisoned him slowly.

It didn’t matter, in any case.

But if you must know, he didn’t have an easy death. Not the worst, either. He got exactly the death that he deserved.

The irony didn’t escape either of them. In fact, the irony vexed them. Because neither Léa Demoustier, Secrétaire de la Magie, nor Herman Ingersblen, Bundeskanzler of the Magiae Ministerium, were willing to speak in their homologue’s native tongue. So of course they used English as a convenient neutral language and the English were the bastards that made this mess in the first place.

“Shit” said the Secrétaire, her head in the fireplace.

“Indeed” answered the Bundeskanzler.

“We are close to them, you know.” Close to receive refugees or close for invasion. Either would be a problem, although she knew damn well which one she preferred.

“Yes, but you said it yourself. He is not well liked in *la France*, it won’t be such a problem.” Ingersblen pointed out. “Germany is another thing. Two ministers came already to cry in my office. In Germany we have beautiful mountains, the best flying brooms and plenty of nutjobs that love a man flashing with power. You can’t control a nutjob. Idiots have no government.”

Ingersblen knew things were bad when Demoustier didn’t immediately reply that French brooms
Thicknesse was still the visible head of the British government. But as soon as they learned of Dumbledore’s death they had dropped all pretence. They were only going after muggleborns at the moment, but Ingersblen was sure that within two months the halfbloods would be in trouble too. And the purebloods, eventually. Because at the end of the day it’s us against them, and they would move the line so that you would become one of them.

“Shit” said Herman Ingersblen. That was the feeling.

***

There were people who cheered in Italy and people who locked themselves in their houses to cry. There were old women, women who remembered, women with white hair and black clothes and hunched backs, coming to their doorsteps and painting a mark in the lintel, the secret mark from long ago that told the meticcio that this was a safe place.

Spain stopped fighting for a moment. “Hay que joderse” said every group, or some variation thereof, before resuming the fight. To date they hadn’t been able to send a representative to speak with Thicknesse because they kept fighting each other. Not just with the other groups, but inside the Voldemort’s sympathisers. At this point they had something close to five governments, two of which had declared independence and where printing their own money.

For the most part, however, Dumbledore’s death and Voldemort’s immediate switch to open war wasn’t felt too much in the continent. The British had forgotten about the rest of the world and as long as Voldemort kept hunting down British muggles, well… It was their business to deal with. One shouldn’t go intervening in other people’s countries. Especially when said countries are close to your own and you are not exactly prepared for war.

But it was felt in Ireland, oh how it was felt. Not proper wizards, were they? Even the purebloods, they were just not as good. But they would show them, oh yes. They would show them their place.

***

That Monday half a dozen deatheaters appeared in The Burrow. They found the place empty, taken by an uncanny silence. Everyone was gone and not a single living creature remained there. Even the attic ghouls and the gnomes in the garden had left.

They burned it down. A house that had been so full of life and laughter. A house with the marks of happy children living there. The fire erased Charlie’s burn in the armchair and the hundredth little accidents from the twins and the scratches in the floor from Bill’s boots.

In the wall below the stairs, the fire erased the pencil marks of the children growing. The year when Ron finally became taller than the twins circled and underlined. The summer when Percy suddenly became just as tall as Bill. That other summer, not so long ago, when they added and eighth name to the wall and they kept it there in successive visits, usually close to Ginny’s.

They burned down everything, took everything. Every single thing touched and used and loved by the Weasley family, every memory.

But that’s all the deatheaters managed to take that day.

***

They also went to Weasley’ Wizard Wheezes.
That area of Diagon Alley was soon deserted as people were too afraid to even stand in the street outside. They watched from the windows and the lunch crowd in *A la maison blanche* looked through the glass while pretending not to be doing so.

They saw three figures enter the joke shop. Three figures dressed with dark robes but with the hoods down. It doesn’t get worse than that, when your murderer comes with their face uncovered.

They didn’t know who the other two were. But the one in the front, that was Antonin Dolohov. The torturer. The one the goblins called *Ironwhip*. Everybody knew him. Everybody knew that cruel face, with the long black hair slicked back and the pointy beard. His eyes were like the end point of a dagger and it felt as if just his gaze could cause pain. He had a purple mark, like a half moon under his left eye. That mark was new but no one dared think that it might be a scar.

They saw, from behind curtains and glass, the three men entering in the joke shop with its bright front. Just three weeks ago the twins had put the U-No-Poo poster and everybody had had a chuckle, despite themselves. A scared laugh but a laugh nonetheless.

Even if they kill you, sometimes if you can laugh at your enemy you are killing them too. Their image and their memory forever tarnished.

This was a hollow comfort when everyone knew what those men had come to do.

They saw them enter and after just a minute they saw a flash of bright green light reflected on the storefront glass. The purple and blue and yellow of the packaging and the posters in the window all muted by that bright sick green.

And then there was white and electric blue and almost a dozen red flashes in quick succession. The glass of the front cracked and some of the posters caught on fire.

They waited in silence. Nobody dared saying a word, not a gasp of horror, because what if people were listening? What if someone thought it was wrong of you to show horror or compassion for those two boys being murdered? What if you were next?

After approximately ten minutes they saw the twins come out of the shop. One of them, wearing a yellow sweater, doused the flames and repaired the glass. The other (green sweater) levitated two bodies out of the shop, knocking them in the head as they went through the door.

All things considered, Dolohov wasn’t too bad. He was just passed out and his robes and hair were smoking a little bit. And he was bleeding, but probably nothing life threatening. The green sweater-wearing twin deposited him on the ground in the middle of the street and then he put the significantly bigger and heavier second deathater on top. It was impossible to identify him, given the nasty *furunculus* hex he had gotten in the face. He looked like a man made out of porridge.

Green sweater went back inside while his brother finished fixing the shop and closing down, planks on the door and shopfront and everything.

Then green sweater returned carrying two suitcases and a turtle shoved under his arm. He put the suitcases down before depositing the live turtle (its legs were moving) on top of the small deathater pile. He also had three wands which were promptly snapped.

There was gasp at this.

By then yellow sweater was finished. He had put a sign on the barred front of the shop that read “*Gone into hiding due to murder attempt. Will reopen after the war.*”
They waved goodbye to the few faces that only now were daring to take a peek from the windows. They made a bow for their audience and taking each other’s arms they apparated away.

***

“Good job” said Remus as the twins appeared in the flat upstairs. The twins beamed and straightened. Praise from Remus felt like getting fifty points each for their house. Not that points mattered, though. Like a golden sticker, then.

That said, Remus turned his attention back to the windows and the illusion fog he was casting. From the outside it would look as if the building were abandoned and had, at the most, a colony of pigeons living in it. Sirius was casting _muffliato_ everywhere and there were another couple of wards Remus wanted to set before they called it a day.

Look, everybody had seen them go. Nobody would expect them to stay in the shop, that was crazy. Remus had ample experience in safeguarding a house, a _werewolf_ house, and this way they didn’t have to figure out how to take with them the sofa and the beds and all the stuff they had in the storeroom.

Plus, if it weren’t going to work Galahad would have told them so. Galahad had sent two more warning notes to the Burrow during the weekend. They knew because the twins were helping their parents move.

***

“Finnigan, I need you to come on a date with me to Hogsmeade.”

Seamus Finnigan had stared absolutely befuddled as Blaise Zabini, current secretary of The Student Union and Interhouse Solidarity Party, made his request.

“Do not be confused” Zabini had said. “I don’t have any romantic interest in you whatsoever.”

“Then, what?”

“I need to get rid of the competition. Thomas is coming dangerously close to Weasley. Once he sees me with you, he will become jealous and abandon his pursuit.”

Seamus had stared some more.

“Okay, are we talking about Ron or Ginny here?”

“Don’t be dense Finnigan, of course it’s Ginny. I will come get you at five and I will treat you to dinner. Dress to impress, please.”

“’Kay” Seamus had answered, even though he hadn’t even said he agreed yet.

He had thought the whole thing was hilarious. Zabini smiled smugly as he took Seamus’ chair for him and Dean spent his whole date with Ginny throwing them increasingly flabbergasted and slightly horrified looks. Ginny also thought it was amusing, but less so after fifteen minutes of Dean not paying any attention to her.

It had been so funny. When Zabini took Seamus’ hand Dean had dropped his pumpkin juice all over himself. It had been so funny!

And then it wasn’t.
At the end of the course they didn’t know what was going to happen to the halfbloods but everybody had heard they were already arresting muggleborns. They didn’t know if it was true, but they couldn’t afford to believe it was a lie.

_Gotta run, mate. Take care._ That’s all Seamus had. Five words scribbled on the back of Dean’s ticket for the Hogwarts Express. Dean and a few others had decided at the last minute not to take the train back home. They didn’t want to bring the hunt to their families, their muggle families that couldn’t defend themselves. They abandoned robes and trunks at the station and left with whatever they could carry. Dean had taken a minute to send this message to Seamus through a pureblood first year.

The ones that didn’t go with them ended up regretting it and jumping from the train as it came to the station. There had been… Aurors wasn’t the word for it, it felt wrong to use it – but yes, there had been some Aurors waiting for them at the platform. Neville Longbottom had his lip and nose broken, but he managed to keep them busy enough that when they reached the last carriage all those who have jumped were already out of sight.

So, yes, the thought of making Dean jealous was less amusing after that.

***

Ron and Ginny didn’t return to the Burrow at the end of the course, they couldn’t, there was nothing to return to and no parents to meet them. Instead they were greeted at the train station by a stone faced Percy and a Bill doing his best to be composed and not look worried. Percy was very well situated in the Ministry nowadays and Bill was good enough at his work that the goblins showed an interest in his continuing existence between the living. Because of them and because of their pureblood status, they would not be harmed. They were still children, after all. They had nothing to fear.

“William will be taking care of you” Percy said, as if William were some new adjunct in the office instead of Bill, their brother Bill, the one who always took care of them. “I am far too busy to look after children.”

Children. Ginny was so angered that she tried to curse him right then and there.

“_Slugulus…_”

“_Protego_”

“…_Eructo!_”

Percy had stopped the curse before Ginny was done speaking. Even Bill was impressed, or at the very least surprised. Everybody knew Percy was a good wizard because he had excellent grades, but that was just theory. It was hard to see him as someone who could perform neat magic. Percy was so uncool you couldn’t imagine him doing anything remotely competent.

Percy just looked extremely bored and only mildly annoyed. He adjusted his glasses with his left hand, fingers delicately surrounding the frame. He was also the only Weasley kid to need glasses.

“As I said, I don’t have time for childish antics. I do hope you won’t bring any trouble to your brother, this family has plenty of that already.” He sighed, as if his family were nothing but an annoyance. “I did try to warn you about the kind of company you kept. William.” Percy nodded his head to his eldest brother and left, not even a glance back at the three of them.

“You know, Percy is ri- calm down, Ginny. He is right. We are not in a secure position. Fred and
George had to go into hiding, did you know? Sent three deatheaters after them. Who knows what they would do to you?"

If Bill said something was serious, then it really was. Bill was fun but he was also a professional curse-breaker so he knew to recognize and respect danger. That was the very first requirement of the profession. As much as curse-breakers seemed cool and fearless, they did not joke around with their work. So Bill knew very well that the deatheaters were waiting for any excuse to kill each and every one of the blood-traitors.

He took them to the apartment he was sharing with Fleur. “Just as flatmates” they had said at first. They were both looking for a place to live in London and it made sense to split the bills. But, really, nobody believed the second bedroom had seen any use at all ever. Ginny would be staying there while Ron would take the sofa. They didn’t have any more space.

It was one of the worst nights in Ginny’s life and she had been possessed by Voldemort when she was eleven years old. Ginny was strong and fiery and bright, but when she went to bed that night she felt terribly lonely and small and worried sick and she missed her mom no matter how much she fought with her. She hated that place. She hated seeing that pretentious bitch who had set her claws on her brother, hers, her Bill who taught her how to defend herself and fight back when the twins’ teasing became too much. She hated that strange bed. She hated Percy, she hated Ron for being silent and she hated Bill for being right. And most of all she hated herself for not being strong enough, powerful enough, to fix this, to get her family and her world back.

She hated that she was crying and she hated that Ron came into the stupid strange bedroom and sat next to her and held her in his arms without saying a word. Stupid Ron who was always too over protective.

***

Percy had taken up yoga. Because his life wasn’t complicated enough he had gone and signed himself in a muggle gym and took classes three times a week.

He had developed a resistance to the most common calming potions and sleeping potions and headache potions. Any sort of useful potion, really, and he was in much need of calm, sleep, and a pain-free head. Hence: yoga and meditation.

It was surprisingly good. His sleep had not improved but he was dealing with the stress and anxiety better. Now he didn’t cry at all during his daily allotted time for breakdowns, so he had added five minutes and used the time for meditating instead. Percy hadn’t lied, he was really busy.

His family was safe. All of them for the foreseeable (ha!) future. They were fine. But there were many others that were not fine and, what was worst, were not going to be fine. Percy knew this, Percy saw this, and many times Percy could do nothing. Percy was just a flimsy young wizard, not even twenty one years old yet, who still didn’t know how to keep his curls in place if he didn’t drown them in gel. He could not bring down a tyrannical regime single-handedly and he could certainly not save every single person he met. Percy was smart. He knew that.

Doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt. Seeing someone’s future and knowing this time he could do nothing.

The worst were the cases when he could do something. When he knew he could save them. But saving them meant condemning himself and often dying (so many times now he had seen his death). And if Percy died he would not be there to protect his family. He would not be there to stop that cursed prophecy that still haunted his dreams. The worst cases were the ones when he was selfish and he chose himself, he chose to live to later save his family and thus condemned someone else.
He was becoming so good at yoga. He could loop and bind his arms around his thigh now.

***

The muggleborns were identified and arrested, their wands taken. They were brought to trial for the crime of stealing a wand and supplanting a proper pureblood wizard, although who was that pureblood wizard whose place they took they wouldn’t say. They were starting to identify the halfbloods, too.

And then…

Even without a wand you could do magic. Everybody knew that. That’s how every child started.

Thea was muggleborn and estranged from her brother because she had been absolutely insufferable during her teenage years when she was going to Hogwarts while David studied in the muggle high school. She looked at the cell where they kept her and another two muggleborn wizards and tried to remember what David, who she was missing so, so much, she tried to remember what David the structural engineer said about materials and support and forces in the few family dinners they still had. She tried to remember and she focused on a weak spot on the ceiling and maybe, all of them together, maybe they could manage to bring it down and get out of there.

And maybe they would.

Let’s say they did.

Let’s say that everybody survived. The muggleborns and the muggles who dared marrying wizards and witches, and those same wizards and witches who went and sullied their bloodline mixing with muggles; and the halfbloods they produced. Let’s say all of them survived and everybody was fine.

Let’s leave it here and not say another word.

Some said that the ones who struggled and fought back, the ones who were killed, they were the lucky ones. Perhaps this was true. Death has a horrible finality, but there is also compassion in it. Death brings the end of everything and sometimes that is good.

The ones who didn’t die… Some of them were sent to Azkaban. Were they the lucky ones? They didn’t die even if they walked and sat with Death now. Undead. Unalive. If hope were something that could be felt in Azkaban, they could hope for the end of the war and the triumph of, of Harry Potter the Child Who Left, or of The Wild Children of Hogwarts or anyone. They could hope to be rescued someday and brought back to the world and to life with just a tenth of the madness that fell over Bellatrix Lestrange and Sirius Black. But they didn’t, they didn’t feel anything other than despair, unending and eternal. They couldn’t even hope for their own deaths and the end of this misery.

The others… they were not sent to Azkaban and no one had any idea of where they were. Were they the lucky ones for avoiding Azkaban? Some said they had been stripped from wands and clothes, that they had been chained and made to serve the new lords as punishment for their crimes. They could hope to escape, but that was a very small hope for such a large amount of pain.

Then there was the ones who escaped arrest. The ones like Dean that slipped through the cracks and made a run for it. But there was nowhere to go. Even if you made it out of the island, to France or somewhere else, there was nothing for you there. No friends or family and just the goodwill of strangers to help you go by. They were lucky, yes, but they didn’t have it good.

The lucky ones were, in fact, the muggleborns even if they were the first targeted. The muggleborns
had the advantage of knowledge. They knew how to buy tickets for a normal train or bus, they knew how to blend, they knew how to pass for a proper muggle, and they were not killing all muggles, not yet. So it was safe between them, it was a matter of keeping cool and feigning they couldn’t see the dementor coming down the street straight at them. Keep calm and if you don’t look at them the monsters will leave you alone, for now.

***

Then there was her, the woman who couldn’t see dementors but if she could she would have no problem ignoring them. This was a woman with nerves of stainless steel who would not let a rag stuck in a vacuum cleaner spook her.

Ever since Harry’s passing and then Remus’, Teresa kept on the stove a pot half full of water. She had, like any proper British person, a water boiler to prepare tea. But now she also had the water on the stove.

When the men came, she turned the stove on and told herself this was just quirky but perfectly acceptable behaviour on her part. Using the pot instead of a proper teapot. Haha. Not paranoid at all.

When they drew their wands on her she had half a pot of boiling water to throw to the face of the closest one. Not enough to stop them, she knew that, but enough to buy time and make noise.

Someone had noticed, apparently, someone in the Ministry had noticed that she used to be married to a wizard and that she lived thirteen minutes away from Lupin’s cottage and they had thought this was an interesting fact worthy of further investigation. This shouldn’t have to be a problem except for when they had noticed, except for how the Ministry was taken by deatheaters and how there was a purge going on and if there was even the faintest possibility that she knew something about Harry Potter they would investigate it.

The man screamed high and raw when the water hit him, obviously unaccustomed to pain. She hit the second one on his extended arm with the pot and bought herself a few seconds. “GO!” she yelled. “Go away!” Big words, important words. She had angered those men just to get the time to scream those words.

They would think they were directed at them. They were not.

Teresa knew there was no way she would survive this. She had been doubtful for the first few minutes, not knowing what kind of wizards these men were. Men that were big and broad and had cruel eyes. But then she had got their measure and she knew they were the kind that not only thought muggles were idiots (most of them seemed to think that) but that they should be killed or enslaved. They would torture and kill her whether she gave them the information they sought or not. The fact that she had known Harry was completely irrelevant.

Had they come an hour earlier or so, Teresa would have excused herself to bring them tea and then fled through the kitchen window. But she couldn’t do that now, she couldn’t leave the house with them inside. She had to stay and she had to make enough noise to give a warning.

To let her know, please, don’t come inside.

There was a spell. Something like an electric shock hitting her on her chest and she came down to her knees, her muscles twitching with spasms. Her fingers had suddenly no strength and her hands opened uselessly.

She cried. They would think it was the pain, but what did they know? They didn’t know the house,
they didn’t know of the air draft and the way the curtains moved every time someone opened the
front door.

They didn’t know, despite their own history, that a mother would do anything to protect their child.
She would let them hurt her, cut her, beat her, rape her, she would let them do anything if it meant
that Olivia didn’t cross that door. If it meant that she turned around and ran. Please, please, just like
in the football games, just run.

***

Olivia wasn’t a witch even though her father was a wizard. She could not do magic and she had not
received a letter of acceptance from Hogwarts.

She could not do what most people would call magic. Harry Potter (and Professor Österbeng from
Sukkertårnet University) thought differently, though. There is magic in the world, beyond what you
can do with a wand, there are powerful spells in simple acts. There is a subtle power that moves the
world and just because you don’t call it magic it doesn’t mean it is not.

There was a very short distance between the door and the kitchen. Short, but not so short that Olivia
couldn’t get enough momentum.

This was the muggle magic. This was her channelling the heroes of her generation. This was Olivia
calling for the strength of Zidane and Ronaldo and Van Basten and Figo, too, even if he was a
double crosser. This was Olivia, who was all thighs and hips and still warmed up from her football
training session, running down the hall of her house to land a thousand pounds-force kick on
Nicholas Mulcifer. Enough to break bone and ligament in the knee and send him to the floor in tears.

And then… Because unfortunately there can be some really ungentlemanly behaviours on football
matches to which our younger generations are exposed through Television and Mass Media, and
since these cubbish acts come from their idols they are taken as role models… Then, Olivia turned to
the second deatheater, the one who was still complaining about having his face boiled, and she head-
butted him so hard she sent him to the floor. He hit his head on the kitchen counter as he went down
and did not move anymore.

Olivia screamed. It was a wonderful scream, close to a roar.

***

Teresa mopped the spilled water and the blood and thought very carefully about whether or not she
should take her child and go into hiding.

“Oh, yes, please!” said Olivia. “Let’s.”

“Children that go into hiding are still required to study.”

Olivia groaned.

Teresa decided against it, for now. But she instructed her daughter to prepare two overnight bags,
one to keep in the car and one to hide somewhere else outside in case they had to leave without
notice and couldn’t go back home to get their things. If that happened, they would have a toothbrush
and clean underwear and an extra pair of socks.

Olivia did all that while Teresa drove away with the men in the back of her car. Olivia shouldn’t
have to see or even know of this part. Teresa didn’t even let her help drag the men to the car
although they were both quite heavy and the fat one was not helping things with his struggling. But
the other wasn’t moving and Teresa didn’t want Olivia to see that.

She dropped them on a bridge two hours away from home and because they had threatened her daughter Teresa made sure they would not return later to stir more trouble. She had seen… She had gone through their pockets and she had seen the papers, the order to find and kill Harry Potter (she knew him as Fleamont but it was all the same) and Remus Lupin and Sirius Black and Ted Tonks and Arthur Weasley and Diana Diggle. She had seen the line over the name Hermes Mansarius and the silver ring, too small for any of their fingers, with an inscription inside that said *Love, M.*

Well, no more. She made sure of that. No more.

Their wands she snapped and chucked on a rubbish bin, but she kept the ring, made note to keep it somewhere safe. One day she would return it.

She called her son. Gave him an edited version of what had happened and told him to be ready.

She instructed Olivia on how to act and what to say and when they came… Because someone would come to see if they were dead and find out what happened to those men, that was for sure. When they came Teresa and Olivia gave a very good impression of having been obliviated.

“I know you don’t I? I… I am sorry, I don’t know, I have been very forgetful lately. Why, I am full of bruises and I can’t for my life remember how I got them.” Teresa extended her arms although she was wearing a long shirt and thus any bruises that could be there remained covered. She smiled faintly. “Of course, John! Of course, I know you. John. Are you here for a date? We use to date, and then we got married, I remember now.”

Meanwhile Olivia barely glanced at her father before shrugging and going to the living room to turn the telly on. Ignoring him was no hard task given how little they had seen each other. He never paid any alimony, barely came to visit them the year when they were divorcing and never once the process was finalized. He had stopped writing once Olivia turned eleven, and he rejected Eddie which to Olivia was the biggest sin anyone could commit. She would rather have punched him, but ignoring him was good enough given the circumstances.

Teresa thought John might have suspected something. But he said nothing and he told his partner that since the muggles had been obliviated it meant Mulcifer and Rosier had left and *obviously* thought they shouldn’t do anything else to the two women. Whatever happened to them it happened somewhere else. Case closed, let’s go.

It was not enough to redeem him, not at all. But it was enough to let Teresa and her children of the hook and when he went back to the Ministry he made sure to misfile the documents of the case.

***

Neither side, Severus thought, neither side was prepared for victory.

On the one hand they had left Peter Pettigrew live when he ought to have had his skull bashed with a rock and his remains burned in acid (Severus knew how). But they let him live so he could go to trial and so he escaped. They were not ruthless enough and mercy rarely wins anything.

Look at Dolohov. They had let him live, the muggles (although barely) and the Ministry wizards that arrested him back when Scrimgeour was still kicking around. They let him live, fools as they were, and so Dolohov was able to try again. This time against the Notorious Fools Fred and George Weasley.

They let him live. The twins did (they and their secret guests only Severus and someone codenamed
Galahad knew about.) They let him live and Severus thought it was folly. It was giving back his assets to Voldemort, again and again.

But Voldemort wasn’t prepared to win either. Voldemort did them the service of killing Dolohov himself. And Gibon and Jugson. Rosier he didn’t kill but he disappeared together with Mulciber while on a mission investigating the whereabouts of Harry Potter and were yet to be found. Rumour said they had discovered something that made them desert and that they were punished for it.

McNair was alive because McNair was a disgusting sick person and he was quick to blame the muggle fiasco of Little Whinging on Dolohov. He was a hard one to kill, that one. Severus knew because of that incident with Lily on her sixth year.

***

And this was how it went just during the first few months of the Second Wizarding War. Although one could say it was not the beginning, the war had started long ago.

Chapter End Notes

I am playing a bit freely with the timeline, more or less pushing it a decade later than canon. So Harry is a teenager in the 00s years rather than the 90s. This allowed me to reference more Disney movies during Harry’s childhood and in this case Olivia’s football role models. The headbutting comes from the 2006 World Cup final in which Zinedine Zidane sent Mazzerati to the ground after the later said some uncomplimentary words about Zidane’s sister. I always felt that Zidane was both in the right and the wrong about it.

For the next two weeks life is going to be hectic for me so I might be slow answering comments. Updates should come as usual, though.
They couldn’t destroy the locket. That was a thing. But since they had found a horcrux without leaving the house everybody was feeling quite optimistic. Besides, it is not that they couldn’t destroy it *per se*, it was that the only available method, fiendfyre was extremely dangerous and they agreed they probably shouldn’t attempt it inside the house.

It also gave them a good clue to continue the search. Voldemort had now used a personal item, a family heirloom, and a relic from Salazar Slytherin himself. There was a theme.

***

Every day they considered fiendfyre. Every day they went down to the kitchens, which were underground and had wall stones and every day they abandoned the idea. Fiendfyre could destroy a horcrux because fiendfyre could and would destroy anything and everything. They weren’t just risking dying in a fire, they were risking burning down the whole street.

Fiendfyre was a no. But the kitchen seemed like a good place to try destroying a horcrux. Good solid stones and iron all around.

They thought about it and they decided that it would be safe to try something else, so they brought down the big cauldron. More than three hundreds years old and made of solid iron. It was a mean and heavy thing, rarely used nowadays. A remnant from the times when magic was wild and everything required extra punch.

They brought the cauldron from its crook and they settled it in the fire. One third full of water left to boil for a whole day with the three of them taking turns to make sure the fire didn’t die and the water didn’t dry. Then another third of the cauldron was filled with oil, and now it would have to bubble for two whole days. They put mittens over mittens and got a leather apron so they could get close to the cauldron.

The third section was pure bleach. They tied scarves to their faces and worked really quick adding the ingredients and fuelling the fire because setting foot in the kitchen was becoming difficult. Thank Merlin that Harry could conjure sandwiches if he tried hard enough because the place had no proper ventilation and there was no way anyone could cook in there. The door to the garden was open, but it did little to send breathable air to the kitchen below.

The brew boiled for three more days.

The next part had to be done very carefully and very precisely, which was difficult when you could not breath inside the room and your eyes watered as soon as you got close to the cauldron. They key was to work in a chain, preparing the ingredients in the stairs and doing a sort of relay race.
The seeds of the African Violet couldn’t be outside their pod for more than fifty seconds before losing their effect. Hermione opened the pod with swift fingers (she had no gloves) and dropped them on Harry’s waiting hands (two pairs of gloves). Harry, who was small and very fast, ran to the cauldron and dropped the seeds. Just as he was coming back to the stairs to take a breath Draco ran past him to add the goat milk. Harry cut the hairs from spiders’ legs and Hermione went to add them to the brew while Draco sweated and cursed his way through distilling pure alcohol from a single blueberry.

Hermione’s blood was waiting in a crystal vial. It was amazing how many of these recipes required virgin blood or woman’s blood at the very least. Harry thought that gender shouldn’t make much difference but since they had Hermione with them, they could just as well use the real deal. She said she didn’t mind.

The blood was the last. As soon as the three droplets fell into the potion the mixture stopped bubbling and went still and crystal clear, like a pond where angels would bathe. This lasted for fifteen seconds before turning to look like the hellish concoction it really was. The brew emitted a rotten acrid smell that made their eyes water and their noses run. They were all sweating and yet their clothes felt like too little protection. Their skin crawled and their hair was bristling. The brew stirred by itself, turning around looking for something to devour, to burn, to melt and destroy down to its very molecules.

There was a reason why this particular recipe was kept in a locked book, even in a house like the Black. The potion would devour anything that entered in contact with it until its hunger was satisfied. And for that to happen it had to eat a living thing.

“All right, Kreacher, come on” said Harry. “Take a deep breath.”

It had to be Kreacher. The elf was changing. As much as he despised Hermione and her muggleness, for the last two weeks he had served her bacon for breakfast on Sundays. He was still insolent with Harry but there was something almost like comfort and trust in there. Insolence doesn’t come easily to a house-elf.

It had to be Kreacher.

The elf was swaddled in wool and leather. He had fought and cried but Draco had insisted that these were not clothes, no one would consider them so, be quiet and give me your arm we can’t have you burning. Draco had wrapped him so much and so tightly that the poor elf could barely move. He looked, in fact, like a horrid newborn. Like one of those stories of changelings, an ugly baby bound and wrapped with cloth. Harry took him in his arms and ran straight to the cauldron and the noxious cloud of vapours.

He would have yelled at Kreacher one last instruction but they really couldn’t open their mouths and the bubble of the potion was so loud he probably wouldn’t have heard even in Harry’s arms.

He didn’t need to in any case. As soon as he arrived to the cauldron Kreacher extended a stick thin arm, made slightly wider by the seven layers of cloth, and dropped the locket inside.

Harry didn’t stay to see what happened. He ran back, his lungs burning for air. Hermione and Draco were waiting to conjure a magic door and seal the entrance after them since the kitchen had no door to speak of, just the stairs.

Even behind the protective spells and the leather that covered his head Harry could hear the piercing inhuman shriek as a piece of Voldemort’s soul started to melt in an acid bath. There was a heart beating madly and Harry couldn’t tell if it was Kreacher’s or his own.
Eventually, they went upstairs. Listening to a fragment of a soul being destroyed loses the novelty and interest after a while. They abandoned their place by the magic door where they had stood in something almost like reverential silence and went back to the library. There they took off their clothes and picked up the things they had used to prepare the ingredients and generally started to pick up after themselves after five days of almost slobbery. The floor of the library was hot from whatever was going on underneath. They all had sore throats even though they had hardly spoken a word, and their noses were red.

Draco forbid Kreacher from going back to the kitchen until they made sure that it was safe. You never knew with the poor elf, he liked his routines. He could just dive back into the infernal circle they had created in the kitchen and sleep in his usual place. But Kreacher had stopped talking and he was trembling, his gaze lost. He didn’t even lash out at Hermione when she put a tentative hand on his shoulder and directed him to the little nest of cushions they had made him (he would not sit on a chair or a couch, but he would take the cushions in the floor).

The floor was hot and they could still hear some faint high notes. They moved further up, to the bedrooms in the third floor. That night they all piled in Hermione’s bed (that used to be Draco’s and used to be Sirius’) because in had started to dawn on them that they had destroyed a horcrux with a cleaning potion (whether it was intended to remove grime or pesky people from your life it didn’t say in the book). Not only that, they had brewed the potion and then they had let a house-elf make the honours.

You can’t be alone when you do something like that. One is bound to cry and giggle hysterically for a little bit and call all the gods.

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The went back to the kitchen three days later, when the floorboards in the ground floor started to cool. They removed the spells and let the room air for the duration of the morning before finally stepping in.

So the horcrux had been destroyed. There was no doubt of that. The three hundredths year old iron cauldron was gone and so was the kitchen itself where they had started the fire; the stone structure and the iron grate for the fire, all gone. All there was in its place was a translucent hard substance and a small piece of iron that they thought may have been part of the cauldron’s handle.

Kreacher had a fit. They thought he was going to die. He saw the kitchen, he saw the crystallized goo and he started to bawl. It wasn’t about the kitchen, though. It was about finally completing the task his beloved Master had given him. It was about finally being able to rest after sixteen years. The elf cried and cried and then passed out and Draco had to carry him upstairs to the nest in the library.

They were all hungry. Harry sang the magpie song and then the song about the queen with red pyjamas and he got them a tray of sandwiches and a plate of fruit. He could do better than that and had done for the past few days but they were all tired and feeling drained.

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BAGSHOT, MAGICAL HISTORIAN, ATTACKED

Three unidentified undesirables assaulted the house of Ms. Bagshot in Godric’s Hollow.

*Goyle to receive special commendation for services rendered.*

By Gavinius Rhode
The renowned magical historian and author of *A History of Hogwarts* Bathilda Bagshot (124) suffered a most foul attack from three unidentified wizards suspected to belong to a radical muggle-friendly platform. The three wizards gained access to Ms. Bagshot’s house and subjected her to an interrogation, no doubt wishing to identify and acquire some of the very valuable wizarding artefacts that the historian keeps in her house.

“They brought pastries” said Ms. Bagshot to this reporter. A good chance to remind the public that this kind of undesirable activists will often adopt deceivingly sweet natures in order to take advantage from the natural agreeable disposition of pureblood wizards and witches.

Ms. Bagshot was spared from a terrible destiny by the fortunate intervention of Mr. Goyle (41) who happened to be nearby and, together with two other wizards who asked to remain anonymous, immediately rushed to the aid of the beloved historian. Mr. Goyle and his companions bravely engaged the undesirables in combat, attempting to draw them out of the house and away from Ms. Bagshot. In yet another proof of the barbarism of this people, the undesirables resisted arrest violently and caused them multiple injuries before fleeing the place.

Mr. Bowcrimpkle, a neighbour of Ms. Bagshot of many years, tells us a chilling testimony of the savagery with which the undesirables conducted themselves: “One of the young ones stabbed a dea-one of the men in the armpit. I didn’t know you could do that with a wand.” A further example that the muggle usurpers do not understand the use of a magic wand since they gained access to them through illegitimate means. Tobias Scamander (of the Scamander family) was visiting Mr. Bowcrimpkle and he adds that “I thought it was some sort of art performance at first. I enjoyed the part when the big one was turned into an icicle.”

We must be grateful for the good work of the Ministry wizards and witches who, under the direction of Pius Thicknesse, are working tirelessly to protect our society from the threat of muggle and muggle-friendly hate. Hopefully, Mr. Goyle and his companions will heal soon from the injuries sustained in the line of duty. Goyle will be honoured later this week with a special commendation for his effort to protect wizarding culture and the elderly members of our community.

This diary reminds its readers to exert caution and keep vigilant for any signs of muggle violence.

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If Voldemort was clearly following a theme in his choice of objects to turn into horcruxes (toddlers non withstanding), the location to store them was less well thought. There was the ancestral ring hidden in his family home which was thematically connected, yes. But although the locket had been hidden under very powerful and nasty security measures the place itself seemed to be some random cave. No matter how they looked at it, it had no relation with Salazar Slytherin at all. Bathilda Bagshot had been quite certain. Slytherin came from the fen and although scholars disagreed if that meant Norfolk or Lincolnshire or Ireland what was certain is that it was not the cave Kreacher had described.

And then his prized diary had been left under the care of Lucius Malfoy, who went ahead and used it for his own political gain.

So the horcruxes were symbolic and they now had a pretty good idea of what to look for, thanks to the friendly and helpful Bagshot. But there was no rhyme or reason, none whatsoever, to their placement.

Which is why they were now on their field trip number eight, visiting the meadow where Rowena
Ravenclaw got to second base with Helga Hupplepuff, or something like that.

Hermione snorted. She looked surprised at her laughter.

“The forest where Nimue trapped Merlin” she said, pushing her hair back from her face. Harry got a glimpse of the vivid pink lines in her arm. She had only stopped wearing bandages three weeks ago and it was less due to trauma and more to the fact that the cuts had only closed then.

If Ron were here he would make her smile more. He was also very good at making her cry, but Ron would make her laugh and she certainly needed to laugh a bit more. At least she barely had any nightmares now. Those first two months had been really bad. Now, though, now she was sleeping more and eating even better and it was really good. It was probably the summer and what little closure they got from Dumbledore’s death, but mostly it seemed that the best therapy was fighting back.

Because they were. They were fighting back and they were getting out of the house. However, powers of disguise on Harry’s part or not, after reading *The Prophet* it had become evident that they really shouldn’t show themselves in public places. (“I can’t believe you forgot to pack your invisibility cloak, Harry Potter. You took a comb, and not the cloak.” “Hey it was a very good comb”). This meant no Knight Bus and no floo unless it couldn’t be avoided. They could try apparition except Hermione had only taken two classes, which was too little, and even though Draco was doing a good job with his disposable wands he felt apparating would be a bit too much (it was after all a bunch of ingredients held in his hand) and no one wanted to see Harry try. It was Harry, not only he would splinch himself, he would probably manage to appear in another dimension.

And, as Hermione pointed out, they didn’t have a license.

The first few times they flew on broomsticks and Hermione didn’t complain even though it was obvious it terrified her. Harry didn’t like it either. He liked flying but he didn’t like that feeling of exposure when they returned to the house and anyone could be following them. Given how Draco kept glancing back he had similar thoughts.

And then the solution presented itself one Monday afternoon when Kreacher popped in their bedroom to bring the clean laundry and popped back away.

Kreacher was an excellent solution for their transport problems and there was minimum stomach jolting in the process. But a house-elf is as powerful as his house and their magic is limited in strange ways. If Kreacher stayed with them while they were out, Grimmauld Place would become vulnerable to all kind of attacks and invasions. Not that anyone was attacking them at the moment, but the house would be more visible, so to speak. It could drift back into the minds of certain people.

So Kreacher only left the house for minutes at a time to drop them somewhere and later pick them up. This was fine. It avoided going through crowds and they went directly to the areas of interest they wanted to explore. They even had a picnic basket for the day.

“I always had the impression that Merlin must had been insufferable.” Said Draco suddenly while they all looked for promising horcrux-hiding spots. “One of those persons who must always correct you and give his opinion to every single thing you are doing. But then it turns out his advice isn’t that good and he spoke without really understanding what you were doing and when you point it out he insists that you didn’t understand and tell you something else that is equally useless.”

Hermione and Harry stared bemusedly at Draco.

“I would trap him under a rock, too” he finished.
They were about to say something. Answer Draco and joke about his ridiculously detailed opinions on historical figures based on absolutely nothing (“I don’t think Helga Hufflepuff ever wore underwear, she strikes me as the kind of lady who wouldn’t” and “I bet Giovanni di Mantua was gay, look at this picture and tell me I’m wrong”). It was good, it was sunny, there was the smell of summer in the air and they were still riding the success of the locket and the visit to Bagshot. They were all feeling optimistic.

And that’s when they heard a raspy female voice scream with clear enunciation the words *Avada Kedavra*.

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The world didn’t appreciate enough the gift to humanity in general and to the wizarding world in particular that was Draco Malfoy. No, no, don’t laugh. This was serious. Draco Malfoy was *a gift* even if he sadly had to say so himself.

First, the whole speech about Gryffindor bravery was a big load of hippogryph manure. Gryffindors weren’t brave. They were reckless to the point of suicidal stupidity and it was up to Draco to ensure their continual survival. They heard someone casting the killing curse and What was their reaction? Why, they dropped the basket and ran in that direction without a second thought. That wasn’t brave, that was stupid. You should give second, third, and fourth, thoughts and approach the place discreetly and checking that you didn’t get your exit cut. The basic “let’s make sure this is not a trap” instinct that Draco thought everybody was born with, but apparently not. Honestly, Harry he could understand but he expected better of Hermione.

Then there was the fact that as charming as Harry was, he really shouldn’t be considered a wizard. Oh, Draco had witnessed some of the things Harry could do first hand; but he seriously doubted they could be considered magic. In fact, most of the wonderful things Harry did seemed to go against all known magic. Like refusing to die from the killing curse (twice) and conjuring food and whole houses, not to speak of him crossing magical *unsurpassable* barriers simply because he was very focused on a song. That wasn’t a thing and it shouldn’t have worked.

Harry wasn’t a wizard. What he did was closer to miracles than anything else and Draco wouldn’t be surprised if he turned out to be the reincarnation of some old forest god that spent his time eating apples and playing the flute. As a wizard, though, he was still on a first year level and he really, really, really, shouldn’t ran to engage the murderous deatheaters. He should listen to Draco when he caught a handful of his shirt and told him to wait and think about it.

The forest went down a gentle slope to a lake below and the voices came from that direction. They creeped that way until they saw the place where the fight had begun. The killing curse had hit a tree and it had been casted with such force that the centennial tree had died, its leaves falling and its bark becoming dry and brittle and white. Hermione touched one of the lower branches with the fingers of her left hand (she was extra careful with her dominant hand) and stared with big eyes as it dissolved into dust.

Such hate. Such strength in the kill.

The woman with the raspy voice screamed again. Her words were fainter in the distance but the horrified screams that followed them were loud and clear. Screams of pain even though they hadn’t been hit by her curse. Screams at seeing a comrade fall.

And again, they tried to run and again Draco, wonderful gift to the world that he was, stopped them.

Draco knew they were actually quite competent in combat despite their youth and alternative style.
The incident at Ms. Bagshot’s had proved they could hold their ground quite well. They merely needed a good strategy and better control of their emotions, which unfortunately is not something teenagers are known for. Plus Harry needed quite a lot of time to focus on his music before he could do his thing.

Draco wouldn’t presume to be the best strategist, but he certainly had admirable self-control. Considering he had inner meltdowns because people put the butter knife on the table rather than a dish, or because they were wearing the wrong colour combination, or because they yawned without covering their mouths (“Die, Zacharias Smith, die, die, die”), the fact that he kept said meltdowns internal spoke of his fantastic restraint. After almost five full years in Hogwarts Draco had still managed not to strangle Justin Finch-Fletchly and his pompous and erroneous French pronunciation, so really, Draco was Temperance in the flesh.

They took a minute to think (some of them while pressed to the ground under Draco’s body to stop them from running and he would like to say it was only Harry but he had to tackle Granger to the ground too and sit on top of both of them) and by doing so they avoided being killed right away. At first hand it may look like it was just the woman and three other wizards chasing a few people down the hill.

But no. It was seven deatheaters doing the chasing, not four.

Deatheaters only come in a single group when they are very sure of themselves. After Dolohov’s downfall everybody had learned to look over their shoulder and they had learned to spread to avoid ambushes.

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Hermione was becoming a tough and hardened witch, or perhaps she had always been like that and they had been too distracted by the hair to notice. Hermione was the first to see the body and she quickly bit the palm of her hand to shut down the scream.

He had fallen face down on the earth. He had fallen and everyone kept moving. Running for their lives or running after them. But he was dead and unmoving and it was as if his murderers didn’t care. His companions probably did, but they had been robbed of the chance to mourn.

If they fought with the deatheaters now they had to win. There was no other option. They had to win or stay alive until dinner time when Kreacher would come for them.

It would be easier to hide and simply wait until they had left. It would be easier and safer and more sensible in the long run. Finding and destroying horcruxes was way more important than saving a handful of hapless lives.

But he had fallen face down on the earth and the grass, and his murderers cared so little about him that they didn’t even desecrate his body. They moved on to the next victim, the next hunt. They just left him there as if he didn’t matter.

Today was hot and sunny and it was going to be full of death. Hermione gave Harry a hairtie and waved them off to go save the people in front while she took care of the three stragglers in the rear. Her own hair was already tied away from her face, all the better to see you with my dear, and her needle wand glinted in her hand.

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They had gone down the small hill and to the lake shore. Wrong choice, wrong choice. Running in a
forest is difficult, but the trees offer much more cover. In the distance Draco and Harry could now see two figures, one male, one female, carrying a third small one and if that was a child and something happened to him they would burn the forest and dry the lake, don’t let anything happen to that child.

Draco grabbed one of the pouches from his belt, cherry wood shaved from a chiffonier and a tiny piece of unicorn horn taken from a hairbrush. Good responsive materials.

The trick to defeating a dark wizard or witch is to be very quick. They are better than you, accept that from the start. They are better at combat, their casting is stronger and their knowledge deep and wide. They are willing to do things that you will never do, so they have the advantage. They can inflict more damage than what you can handle. You will be harmed as soon as the duel starts and there won’t be much that you can do afterwards.

“I don’t suppose you brought a comb with you” whispered Draco.

Harry, his hair in an insultingly messy bun, said no with his head. Draco resisted the temptation to bury his hands in the hair and straighten it or something. Such hair he had! It was so very black and messy, and he shouldn’t be thinking about it right now. Merlin.

“All right, then.” No comb. No magic cage. They would do something else.

They ran parallel to the lake shore but still hidden by the trees until they caught up with the deatheaters. The fleeing woman was now holding the child while the man drew his wand.

“Keep running!” they heard him say, followed by two weak protegos and a stupefy. The spells weren’t particularly powerful but he was quick with them. Maybe he could buy the woman enough time to get away.

Draco liked stupefy because it was a very useful spell in its simplicity. You casted it and the victim would drop unconscious. But unfortunately people were becoming more and more adept at fighting its effects. The man hit by the spell barely stumbled before shaking himself back to his senses.

Cherry and unicorn weren’t materials suited for fighting, too soft and benevolent, but they weren’t a bad combination if you thought about it as a suggestion to send someone to sleep rather than as a duelling move. Draco pointed his fist at the closest deatheater while he stepped away from the cover of the trees. He ended the movement with his open palm facing up. There was a sizzling sound and the deatheater fell down. Huzzah for Draco, everybody!

Draco took another pouch, rosewood and dragon scales, and set the woman’s robes on fire. He had no idea of who was she, but one look at her face with the deep shadows under the pale blue eyes was enough to know she was one of the Core. One of the old and mean and most devoted followers. One of the really mad ones that preferred Azkaban over denying their loyalty to Voldemort.

Her robes had barely burned before she extinguished the flames. Not even a water charm like Umbridge had to use so often during the riots. The fire was simply gone and she was turning to Draco who was scrambling to get one of the good bags out of the bandolier. Oak and ash and old iron rubbed over his gloved hands.

Her curse sent Draco flying three meters back, but he was alive and only a bit sore. His silent protego had been strong enough and in the meantime the other wizard had used the distraction to cast spell after spell and in a bit of mad good luck had managed to cast Locomotor Wibbly on one of the
deatheaters who was now jumping up and down the shore.

“Expelliarmus” cried Draco, burning his bag of walnut and troll blood. The jumping deatheater dropped his wand and that meant there was just another wizard and the really scary witch and Harry could join the fight whenever he felt like it, no need to wait for an invitation. Anytime would be good.

“Protego!, Incendio, Baubillious, Reducto!” said the poor wizard. He sounded tired, very tired, and his voice was hoarse but he kept casting anything that came to his mind. From his wand erupted flames, a bright yellow bolt that was a bit blinding, and then a blue-black line that didn’t hit anyone and was lost in the water. It wasn’t a bad technique, as stupid as it looked. The deatheaters were used to fighting Aurors and adult wizards. This mad succession of spells was unusual and it worked in keeping them distracted and second guessing. Enough that Draco could get hawthorn and leather (from the broken punishing switch, so blood soaked leather) and cast bombarda and send everyone to the floor.

Hahahaha! Kiss the dust.

The woman rolled and jump back to her feet with animal speed and fluidity. Her long mane of dirty blonde hair moved after her like the tail of a forest creature. Like the fox or the marten. She made a zigzagging movement with her wand, slashing the air and leaving purple lines behind and Draco found himself on the ground and short of breath, blinking. He saw his right arm was full of blood and he felt a certain numbness extending from his chest to his arms, but he didn’t stop to think about it and he wouldn’t even notice that he had five deep bleeding gashes on him until much later. You can thank adrenaline for this. All he knew was that he had used five wand pouches already and that that woman was impervious to everything.

Another motion from her wand and the poor wizard they were trying to help went down in a flash of red light. Not a stupefy, though. You don’t scream like that with the stunning spell.

It felt like the moment was made of silence, although it was actually filled with screams. But it felt silent and quiet because suddenly they were both on the ground, that poor wizard and him, and she was standing and she could allow herself to go slowly, take her time and savour it.

“And who are you that you dare come between the Dark Lord’s servants and their mission?” she had a deep voice that could have been beautiful in song if she were able of such a thing. She probably wasn’t. She didn’t seem like someone who could understand music. “You will answer me and I will kill you last. The mudblood goes first.”

Draco, being Draco, ignored this and wondered about what had happened to the third deatheater. The first one was unconscious and hopefully would remain so for a while. He could still hear the second one jumping and cursing them to the seven hells, but the other he didn’t know if he had been hit with the explosive curse or not. Not that it mattered much because that woman was about to kill both of them, but still Draco wondered. Draco was a big-picture kind of guy.

The muggleborn wizard was telling the woman what she could do with her prejudice and her person which involved putting one inside the other. His voice was a bit familiar but he was gasping and Draco felt a bit dizzy, so who knew. Maybe we all sound the same when we are about to die.

“Crucio” said the witch, followed by a new list of colourful expletives from the wizard. She was not the only one with feline grace and the wizard had rolled away from her curse. Good for him. Maybe then Draco would have time to get another wand bag out. There seemed to be a problem with them. Draco got on his knees, ignoring the nausea he felt at moving and the woozy feeling, and looked down at his hand. The gloves were stained, one could even go as far as say drenched, with blood but
other than that his hands were not trembling. Yet he felt an odd tingling on the tips of his fingers and for some reason he couldn’t grab the strings that closed the little pouches.

“Eat poison and die, fart-face” said someone on the background. Probably the muggleborn.

Must be the gloves, Draco decided. The gloves were the problem. He bit on his index finger and tugged to remove it. Just one hand, one free hand to get another wand and he would put the willow bark and acromantula hair on his right hand and then he would make a spiral with a long tail and cast *expelliarmus* and everything would be all right.

Well, he still didn’t know what had happened to that other wizard. He couldn’t forget about him once he disarmed the witch. Because he would, he was going to disarm her. He was, look at him. First the witch and then the other one.

“Avada KedaaAAAaaaaah!” screamed the woman as she was hit with a tree branch. The tree line was well over forty steps behind them, yet she had just been knocked aside by a branch.

“Eliaiiisaa, heelp meelee!” said a voice coming from the tree that was suddenly standing there, in the middle of the land between the lake and the forest. The tree shook its branches again and knocked the witch once more. She had blood on her face. The witch, Elisia, tightened her grip on her wand as she stared at the flailing tree. One of those thin ones with the white bark and leaves that sometimes look silver or gold. A pretty but strange tree.

“Hhhheeelp” whispered the tree.

Birch. It was a birch and there was a face in his trunk and he extended his branches towards Elisia who understandably had forgotten all about Draco and the other guy. Probably because she was confronted by the unusual vision of one of her colleagues transforming into a freaking tree before her own eyes.

The best part was when she raised her wand and screamed “*Incendio*” but she got nothing because her wand and hand had disappeared and she now had instead her very own tree branch. She screamed and shook it and knocked at it with her left hand that soon started to sport a rough dark bark. She twisted and contorted and screamed and screamed and by the time Draco had pushed himself back to his feet Elisia was two thirds a willow tree. The wind shook their leaves. Harry was standing behind them, both hands extended in the air and an expression of concentration and quiet, controlled, fury. He had removed his hair tie and used it to keep his wand on his forearm. His long hair, black and untamed, danced around his face and in that instant he looked more like Merlin than any other depiction ever did. He looked like Morgana, too. Like a forgotten god of the forest, like the old magic, the raw magic. He looked like someone you would hate and fear and love. The effect was dissipated by the glasses though.

When all they could hear from the witch was the susurrus of her leaves in the wind and Harry finally lowered his hands, Draco was still staring at him. The mad wonderful boy who fought everyone and turned the bad people into trees and wondered at the name of the stars. Harry.

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Technically, Harry hadn’t turned the two deatheaters into trees. What he had done was trap them inside their wands for an undefined period of time because he didn’t know how long it would last. He thought he should now do something about the third deatheater who had jumped his way to the
It was mad, they were all mad. There were two murderers transformed into vegetation and a third one jumping in the background and tripping over the unconscious body of a fourth deatheater they had all forgotten about. There was death and there was sunlight and Harry could still feel Draco’s lips over his own. Draco’s lips were not plump nor full but they were very pink. The best kind of pink.

Then came Dean. Because it was Dean, dear Merlin, Dean Thomas so kind and funny and open-minded and so close to death right now, he had been so close! Dean seemed to think this was a thing they were doing and he was probably mad with relief too, so he sent one last jinx in the direction of the jumping deatheater before taking a hold of the back of Harry’s head and planting a kiss. Not as good as Draco’s, but a good kiss nonetheless, points for enthusiasm and technique. No real complaints here, Dean was very hot even under present circumstances.

“It’s so good to see you” cried Dean after he broke the kiss and hugged Harry, and yes, Harry agreed, it was good to see him. Harry patted him on the shoulder and took the chance to take some deep breaths. He was very short of breath.

“Draco!” Dean went on. He had a big beautiful smile on his face and tears in his eyes.

“No! nonononmmh!”

There was a definite possibility that Dean had been confounded. Or maybe it was just the rush of adrenaline and general excitement for not dying. Harry got it, the first time he didn’t die (and he was awake right after) he also found it very exciting. Dean was now kissing a protesting Draco and dipping him which, uh, interesting image that Harry was keeping for later.

“Dear Merlin, Thomas!” sputtered Draco when he was upright once more.

When Hermione arrived, not too long after, she was thoroughly kissed too even though Dean ought to have gotten a hold of himself by then. She blushed awfully and looked a bit flustered, but not so much that she couldn’t cast a stunning spell that sent the jumping deatheater flying away from his wand. (Awful man but his tenacity ought to be commended). Since Draco was pink and looked completely lost and a bit wild, and Dean was still crying and laughing and hugging them, Hermione ended up looking like the only one in control. Harry had a hold of himself, but he hadn’t look self-possessed a day in his life. (Luna had the same problem. He wanted to blame the hair).

Harry had no problem admitting Hermione was a superior being and the ultimate adult supervision. She sent Harry to take the wands from the unconscious deatheaters and ordered Draco to take his
Draco looked in bemusement at the five bleeding cuts that criss-crossed his chest and arms. “Oh” he said. “It hurts when I look at it.”

“Then look at Harry, will you? You are probably in shock. Sit here.”

Draco did as he was told while Hermione rummaged on her bag and got a bottle of dittany to clean and close the wounds. The flesh healed quickly and without blemish, so at least they knew they were not cursed wounds. Next was Dean who was dizzy and hurt and exhausted and alternating laughing with crying. Harry sat next to him and held his hand while Hermione tried a couple of healing spells. The thing that helped the most was giving him a bottle of water, though. He was a bit dehydrated.

And then, they went on. It was still a sunny and beautiful day and it was still full of death. This is the thing about life, you don’t get to skip the ugly and pedestrian parts, you don’t get to skip the part when you have to pick up. And healing always takes longer than hurting.

There was much to do. They let the two non-transformed deatheaters under the birch tree, bound and gagged and without their wands. They were both unconscious now but one of them kept kicking madly even in his sleep.

A little while later the woman that was running with Dean came back to see what had happened. She was a squib by the name of Peoria, and she was looking just as exhausted as Dean.

It turned out that the small figure they had seen wasn’t a child but a goblin called Griphook. He had injured his legs badly and couldn’t run, hence why they had been carrying him. It would take a while until he was fixed, and they didn’t have skelegro, but as soon as Hermione gave him a quick remedy for the pain he wobbled to the willow tree despite her protestations that he should rest. Griphook closed his long knobbly fingers around a low branch and after taking a breath he snapped it.

They all flinched at the crack of wood, but no one said anything.

Instead they walked slowly back to the forest. There was a smoking circle free of trees and vegetation with a big black gooey pile of something a bit off centre and a lonely pair of leather boots. Hermione went by without a second glance and no one dared ask her. Just like with Griphook, no one felt like they had the right to say anything.

The dead man was called James and he was a muggle and a proud father of two Ravenclaw girls. He had taken care of all of them as they went into hiding. Dean told them that many people had had to run, but if you didn’t find a safe place to hide, running only took you so far. They had met James at a safe house that was attacked by snatchers and they only got out thanks to Dean’s magic and James’ resourcefulness.

And now he was dead.

It was still hours until Kreacher came for them. They gave their lunch to the rescued trio and to Draco who was looking a bit paler than usual and had to be told to sit for a while. The wounds may have closed but his clothes were still wet with his own blood.

Harry and Hermione went and found a big nice tree under which they could bury that poor muggle called James. Not just any tree, but a beautiful one. Hermione could be trusted to pack all kind of supplies on her bag and so she found a spare shirt that they used to shroud James’s face. He shouldn’t have dirt on his face.
Somehow Draco had ended up holding all the captured wands. Probably because he was the one carrying more pockets, so he had the two from the deatheaters by the lake and three taken by Hermione. Griphook, the goblin, asked to keep one of them.

“Wand use is restricted to humans” said Draco matter-of-factly before engaging in a thankfully brief speech about control and the power restrictions imposed by the elite, all while he examined the captured wands with the same careful and critical eye of Ollivander. “Here. Walnut and dragon heartstring. Not the best for delicate work, but powerful and solid.”

The goblin accepted the proffered wand silently and perhaps trying to cover his surprise at having gotten away with his request. Wands were restricted to humans and lately only to those who could prove pure blood status up to four generations from both sides. Dean Thomas was grinning as if he couldn’t think of a better spectacle.

The other wands were broken in three pieces and buried at the feet of the muggle called James. No one was sure on how to spell his surname, so they only carved a big “J” on a stone put at the head of the tomb.

Harry promised to himself that he would find his daughters and show them the tomb so they could take him back, just as he had promised to one day retrieve Regulus Black’s body.

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They invited them to return to the house, of course, but to their surprise they refused. Griphook thought they could go to a goblin safe house and he said he would speak for Peoria and Dean. Goblins didn’t like wizards or humans and Griphook was no exception, but in the last forty-eight hours he had been saved by a muggle, helped by a squib, seen a muggleborn wizard stay behind to protect them and finally met an insane pureblood who handed him a wand. He was a bit more willing to accept that this was not a species conflict.

“It would probably be safer, anyway” said the girl, Peoria. She had a funny smile, with a gap in her front teeth that made her instantly likeable. “No offense, but you are… Harry Potter. In the best of cases, we will slow you down.”

The matter was settled. It was pointless, they said, to follow Harry and the others around, especially when only Dean could do proper magic. Besides, Dean took his position as Secretary of The Platform for Race, Blood, and Species Equality very seriously, and didn’t someone say to keep fighting, Draco? It would be good, he argued, if he could get people working together. They had seen them, they knew they were alive and they knew they were working together, doing what they didn’t know and they weren’t about to ask. But just being able to say that they had seen Harry, Draco and Hermione and that they were fighting Volomon would give hope to others and help them work together.

“Volomon?”

“You haven’t heard? They put a taboo in the name. Pronouncing it brings deatheaters to your location.”

Harry’s eyes gleamed. Hermione elbowed him with the word “no” already in her lips. No, they were not going to the top of a volcano and saying the name there to see what happened.

“We were calling him Vee” said Peoria “but it kind of sounds like a euphemism for vagina and, I dunno, it was awkward.”
“I can’t believe how many people want V back” said Dean with a pathetic attempt at a serious face. “I knew V had followers, but this is unexpected. I would never have pegged him as someone who wanted V.”

It certainly left room to interpretation.

“You should call him Tom” said Harry who for some reason had now multiple leaves tangled in his hair and a female robin bird perched on top. “That’s his real name. Not even Thomas. Tom. Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

“Why would he change to Voldeaaah?” Peoria stopped herself quickly. “Why would he drop the Riddle?”

“That’s exactly what I have been saying!” Exclaimed Hermione.

So they didn’t return with them but it was a very good meeting nevertheless.

Kreacher didn’t want to take them, though. Kreacher, when he arrived, started to shake as soon as he saw that Draco had been injured. But they managed to calm him down and swore they would all wait safely tucked away while he apparated Griphook and Peoria and Dean to a small village south of Oxford. Still, he didn’t start to relax until an hour after he brought them home and he tried to keep Draco’s bloody shirt.

***

It had been a beautiful day, warm and sunny, and Harry had gotten a kiss. Two, actually, but he could not stop thinking about one of them. It was also a day in which a good man had died and many others had come close to it and the normalcy and safety of the house felt surreal.

They were covered in grime and sweat and in Draco’s case blood. They took turns washing in the second floor bathroom (the shower worked better on that one) because sometimes cleaning spells are not enough to make you feel really clean. After that they all trudged upstairs, feeling drained. Hermione went to her room and she didn’t even close the door behind her before falling down on top of the bed, so tired she was. Harry and Draco went to the room that had become theirs even though summer came weeks ago and they could not use the excuse of the cold anymore.

That night, as they undressed slowly and tiredly, it was Harry’s turn to take Draco’s hands and look at his chest, pale and unblemished. There was no trace of the deep bleeding gashes that had crossed it, no trace at all, but still Harry remembered exactly the location of the cuts. He knew the place where there ought to be a scar.

He put his hand on Draco’s chest, under his breastbone, and moved it slowly down until he found his beating heart. Under his fingers there was solid flesh and soft skin, not even the blood that had stained his clothes.

“Does it hurt?” Harry asked, eyes fixed on his fingers. “Maybe it’s swollen or bruised.”

“No, it’s… It is fine. It didn’t even hurt then. I didn’t notice.”

Harry nodded. “Good. That’s… good.”

They would forever claim that it was Harry who leaned forward and took Draco’s mouth with his own, but if Draco was already moving it didn’t really matter. It was a simple kiss, soft and gentle, it felt like drinking cold water in the heat. You had to go slow so you wouldn’t be hurt. You had to go slow and relish it.
After that kiss many other followed, easy and natural like holding hands when stepping inside a big, cold, hostile house. Like napping and sleeping together to keep their worst fears and the loneliness away. Like flying together and fighting together and cooking and bickering. It felt natural and it felt right and they kissed and kissed that night while holding hands.

***

“Given that Mr. Weasley is already an adult I hardly think your presence will be necessary, Mister Weasley.”

On the contrary, Bill thought his presence was very necessary because he did not trust the Ministry at all when they said that they only wanted to ask Ron some questions. He understood they weren’t in a position to say no, especially after that business with the twins, but if Ron had to do it then Bill wanted to be there and make sure nobody touched a single hair of his head.

Only they were quite opposed to letting him be present during the interrogation which made him even more adamant that he should be there. Ron, thankfully, was saying nothing. But he had asked Bill if he thought that they would give him veritaserum and he probably thought Bill didn’t notice but he had a piece of the twins’ special gum in his hands.

Bill was sure that Ron couldn’t say anything useful about Harry or the twins. It was all a waste of time and Ron had no reason to be worried except for how his lack of collaboration and that stupid piece of gum made him look like he had a lot to say about the topic. It is not about what you know, it is about what they think you know and what they will do to make you talk.

He should really take that gum away before Ron ate it.

“Is there a problem, Caecilius?”

There was a time when Bill would have been relieved at seeing his brother Percy. When he would have smiled and maybe teased him a bit about his work in the Ministry but he would still have been relieved and grateful that Perce, good old Perce with his high position in the Ministry, had come; because he was sure that he would help them out of this mess.

Now was not the time when Bill could think that. There was no relief.

“Mister Weasley” said the Ministry officer, a middle age man who looked and acted eerily like Percy. “Mister Weasley here has concerns about the request of an informational interview with Mister Weasley.”

Dear Merlin, how could anyone utter such sentence and mean it? Yet the man spoke as if there were nothing humorous whatsoever in his phrasing and Percy looked equally serious.

“Oh, dear.” Percy managed to sound as if he had just caught someone before they misfiled something. “I’m afraid that in this occasion William is right. Ronny can be so uncooperative. It is often so with the younger siblings, I am afraid. Always spoiled.”

“No, that’s not.”

“Thank you, Caecilius. I will take it from here.” Percy interrupted and it was only then that Bill realized how powerful little Perce was. How high and deep in the structure of the Ministry that he could actually order people around and dismiss their words. Bill was the eldest. He remembered when Percy had to be potty trained. Of course he never stopped thinking of his brother as that little curly haired freckled boy who somehow managed to keep a shrieking frog as a pet for two months without anyone discovering him.
Percy dropped his hand, narrow and long fingered like Bill’s, like Ginny’s, on the back of Ron’s neck. “I will make sure Ronny is at his most cooperative.” He extended the other hand palm up, white and almost feminine. Caecilius only hesitated a second before handing the clipboard with the papers.

Just like in the station, Percy nodded at Bill coldly. “William” he said. His hand tightened on Ron’s neck, pushing him into motion. Ron was almost Bill’s height, almost Percy’s height, and he was being quiet, quiet, quiet, because he was only a seventeen years old boy about to be pressed into giving information of his best friend.

*I taught you how to hold a wand!* Bill wanted to scream. Because he had. Yes their mother taught them how to read and write and tell the hours, but Bill was the one who taught the others how to hold a wand just like Charlie was the one who taught them how to fly a broom. Bill taught him how to hold a wand and how to apperate when against all expectations Percy turned out to have trouble with it. (It was almost as if he didn’t know where he was at any given time let alone where to go). Bill had done all and he couldn’t believe that Percy would choose himself and his career before his family, that he would sacrifice Ron just like that.

But there wasn’t much that Bill could do, standing there in the Atrium. Or there was, which was even worse, because Bill would have no trouble cursing Percy and sending him to the floor, and he could stop any spell they sent his way. He could fight his way out of this situation, he was certain of that, grab Ron and run.

But that would only get them as far as outside the building. What then? What about Ginny and Fleur back home? They had requested to interrogate Ginny too but thank Merlin she was still under seventeen and he had been able to say no.

Dear Merlin, if he hadn’t agreed to taking them at the beginning of summer…. If he had decided to let them with Percy and he had stayed with Fleur in their beautiful small apartment… Percy would have been the one in the position to say no, and he wouldn’t, he wouldn’t have. He would have given them their little sister just as he was now sending their baby brother down.

***

Fenrir Greyback had acted on his own, or so they would say.

Fenrir Greyback had let himself in Bill Weasley’s apartment on the evening of a full moon. But Bill wasn’t there. He was waiting for his brother Ron to be released from the Ministry and in the meantime he had taken his sister to go get some ice-cream because that was all he could do at the time to make her and him feel better.

That was all right for Fenrir. Killing and maiming the three weasels would certainly be praised in death eater circles, and he still intended to do it, but he had actually come for the girl. The beautiful girl with milky skin and rose petal lips.

She was taking a shower. By the time she came out Fenrir would have already transformed. A pity, that he didn’t remember well what happened during transformations, because he would like to remember this. The taste of her blood and her flesh, her screams as he tore on her. Her white skin would look very pretty with the bright blood running down.

Fenrir thought that he would also get the Weasleys when they returned home and with a bit of luck the man would see what he had done to his lovely little girlfriend. Fenrir would like that.

***
Werewolves were pretty much animals, everybody knew that, so there was hardly anything to investigate. The werewolf saw the opportunity and acted on instinct and certainly not because of any political agenda. Besides, they should have known better than leaving a half-veela alone in the house. How irresponsible, they were pretty much asking for something to happen. They even had a window open! Clearly the werewolf got a drift of her smell through the open window and thus acted on it. They had no one to blame except themselves.

So the apartment was a fifth floor. Still they were asking for it leaving the girl there. And who was to say that she hadn’t invited him in? That was veelas, you know? They liked it. They wanted it. They were always trying to entice men. Maybe she did and maybe this time she found that the man she was toying with was more than she could handle.

The officials investigating the case didn’t have a pre-written report of what happened, but they could just as well. The case was clear.

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First of all, Fleur Delacour was not a veela. She was not even half-veela. She was a quarter veela and really tired of having to explain this, not that it did any good because people never listened.

(Harry did. But nobody listened to him when he said werewolves were not mindless beast).

In Fleur’s experience men were divided in three categories: First were the ones who got all nervous and flustered and acted like bumbling idiots, embarrassing themselves and everyone else in the room who was subjected to the pathetic spectacle. Then there was the ones who had a bit more control over themselves and were pathetic in a different way. They unfailingly tried to impress her, usually by behaving like total jerks who knew everything! and could do everything! and were So! Much! Better! than Fleur, and she should obviously fall to her knees and worship these great men, or suck their cocks, or both.

Lastly there was the sadly small group of men that were not interested in her. Some gay, some asexual, some with too much sense of ridicule and a few who were so deeply in love that were blind to her charm. Krum had been pretty decent. So was Harry, but he was a child.

(Poor Diggory blushed a lot around her but he managed not to make her uncomfortable).

With women Fleur only knew jealously and viciousness and occasionally some attraction. They were usually much sweeter, the girls that went after her, but still too similar to the boys in what they wanted.

Then there was Bill. Sneaky slippery Bill who couldn’t be categorized. For her first month during her internship in Gringotts Fleur had thought he was gay. Bill didn’t offer to help her with her English like every other male human staff in the bank did (and about half of the clients), but he did offer to help her with the culture and the pragmatic aspects of settling in. He told her where to buy groceries and how to take her tea and he walked her around Diagon Alley showing her the shops and didn’t try to kiss her at all. He touched her arm a couple of times but he didn’t blush or stammer, he simply did it to bring her attention to something. Fleur noticed that Bill had a beautiful smile and that when he spoke he looked her in the eye.

They moved in together. It was convenient for both of them and less expensive. Bill had demonstrated to be able to work and live around her without making a fool of himself and Fleur was happy. A nice gay friend to help her while she lived in a foreign country. Someone who treated her like a person rather than a fantasy.
Still, sometimes Fleur wished that someone, some day, would be able to treat her like a woman. Not the sex-dream and not the sexless friend but a woman made of flesh and hair rather than silk and gold or whatever stupid metaphor they came with. But that was idle thinking and she knew it couldn’t be. In the meantime, Fleur took the friend she had and counted herself lucky for having met someone as nice as William Weasley, who, by the way, never showed any interest in dating anyone. She thought he might be asexual and wasn’t that funny? The asexual man and the half-veela sharing quarters. And he was a fine man, Bill Weasley. Si bandant. There must had been a lot of people frustrated by his disinterest.

Fleur didn’t think that it was a pity that such a handsome man remained single because it was exactly the same kind of thinking they applied to her and it hurt. Fleur, such a beautiful girl! I wonder who will she marry, how will her kids look like? As if she weren’t a champion witch, a curse-breaker, someone who learned a second language and gave the big brave step of going to another country. It hurt and she wouldn’t do that to another.

But when Bill smiled at her she saw fire in the corner of his lips and damn! It was a pity that no one was getting to kiss that fire.

Then one rainy Tuesday morning like any other morning in that stupid wet country someone brought an old broken coffer and they got into an hours long argument about the best method to break a triplication curse. The argument took all of their morning and extended until lunch and she saw his eyes shine and darken with pleasure and she didn’t know. She didn’t know…

This continued for a few months, rainy and windy months during which they were professional but also friendly to each other and absolutely nothing else, despite the knowing smirks of their coworkers. That is, until they accidentally brought up the topic of curse decay in fabrics which started a three days long argument in which they both refused to concede their point because it somehow became a matter of personal, scholar, and patriotic pride. The argument was never officially settled, but somehow on Sunday afternoon it led to Bill shagging her spectacularly on the kitchen counter, and the couch, and eventually one of the bedrooms where Bill buried his face between Fleur’s legs and declared this was the place where he wanted to die, only he made it sound very poetic. And would you look at it? Not asexual after all, just laid back and respectful and so used to living in close quarters with lots of people (at home, in school, in the program in Egypt) that Bill had acquired an amazing mastery of his libido. He was probably demisexual or something like that (Fleur had read a lot about sexuality out of necessity), but she wasn’t overly concerned with the definition.

She was quite enamoured of him.

She was also, in case this was not clear, so much more than a pretty veela. This was the point. She was more than a pretty face and Bill knew that, he saw that. The man shagging her was also the man who remembered that Fleur was a threat assessor of cursed objects at Gringotts and champion of her school in the triwizard tournament.

She did not need to have her wand at hand to repel the initial attack of the werewolf. The monster didn’t even get close to her. Honestly, if they could see she had inherited her grandmother’s veela beauty, why would they think she didn’t get the whole package? Like the bird-face when she grew angry or the fact that veelas could throw fireballs out of their hands.

Of course those who make this mistake rarely get the chance to tell others about it.

Today was not Fenrir Greyback’s lucky day, but neither was Fleur’s because Bill returned home sooner than expected. When the door opened the werewolf lashed out, trying to make an exit, and clawed at Bill’s face and shoulder. He didn’t get to do more than that because by then Fleur had her
wand in hand and she hit him twice with a spell. The creature ran away, leaving behind the smell of blood and burned hair.

It was agreed by the investigating wizards that the unidentified werewolf probably wouldn’t return and they closed the case.

They spent the night in St. Mungo, Fleur and Ginevra, later joined by Ronald whose interview at the Ministry had to hurriedly come to an end once they heard about the attack. They stayed there, sitting side by side in the stone bench on the corridor and when they heard that Bill hadn’t been infected and that he would keep his eye, they hugged long and tight. Fleur knew that on that day, finally, the wall between her and the annoying sister had started to fall. On that day, they came together.

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Draco did not taste like lemons and the skin of his neck and under his ear did not have a hint of orchids and his hair certainly did not give a faint smell of honeysuckle. Draco was a person and so he smelled like one.

That doesn’t mean that Harry didn’t feel the lemon, the orchid and the honeysuckle all the same. They were there even if they were not.

This was a thought that made sense.

“Draco?”

“Uhrmf.” Draco’s face was currently buried on the space between Harry’s neck and shoulder and it was a wonder he was not suffocating with all the hair.

“I realize this is a weird question.”

Harry felt Draco’s shoulders and back ripple with laughter. Harry also realized this was a rich statement coming from him. Just for that, he turned his head a little bit and kissed the crown of Draco’s head. There was much of Draco he hadn’t kissed yet. There was much he hadn’t done, but for now it seemed like he, they, couldn’t jump to the next stage when they were not done kissing yet.

“Are you part veela?”

There was a snort as Draco came up for air, resting his weight on his elbows. He smiled with a mouth that still had thin lips of a lovely pink. Many men could get lost and do something foolish because of that shade of pink. Women too, or so Harry thought.

Side note, he would like to re-read *The Odyssey*.

“Late.” Draco said, clearly amused.

“Late… late for what?”

“Too late for that question” he shifted a bit and pushed Harry’s hair away before dropping next to him, both of their heads on the same pillow. “The Quidditch World Cup had veelas and ab-so-lute-ly everybody in Hogwarts got into their heads that I had to be one too. And then of course they saw me talking with Delacour and never mind that I am the only one in Hogwarts who speaks decent French, we had to be talking about veela things, obviously.”

Harry stared at his mouth. It could be true. He was certainly feeling things he hadn’t felt with Fleur.
“I am just blond.” Pointed Draco.

“You are very pretty in any case” and to prove that, Harry kissed his cheek.

“You know the Weasley twins tried to steal my hair and sell it to Ollivander for wandcores.” Draco muttered while he shifted position to fall asleep. “He doesn’t even use veela hair.”

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“What I can’t understand is why nobody thought that Lovegood could be part veela.”

“Oh my god” muttered Hermione, tiredly dropping the sugar in her tea mug. “Draco, please, not you too.”

“I don’t see why I could be one but not her.”

“The things you make me hear.”

***

It had been Harry’s birthday and it had gone without celebrating. The skip only becoming obvious now when the date of Hermione’s birthday came closer and closer and Harry began to think about baking her some special dessert.

It had been Harry’s birthday and they hadn’t celebrated, but after last year and after the one when he turned eleven Harry had grown weary of birthdays. Draco and Hermione had known without being told and so they went over that day, and the week before and the week after that like thieves melting with the shadows, careful not to do anything that would bring disaster.

Now it was September. Now it felt as if the danger had passed, a curse averted until the next year. Now Harry could receive a birthday present in the form of a kiss.

And just in case the curse was still active, Draco hid the kiss between hundredths more so that no one would be able to tell which one was it.
“So I thought I would ask” said George Weasley cheerfully alternating between balancing on his heels or his tiptoes. The effect was as if he were standing on the deck of a ship rather than on a little park in Aughton (the one in Lancashire). “We have to give you a nickname, there is no question about it, but we are not sure about what. We were thinking Secretus.”

“No.”

“Yes, that’s what Remus said.” George admitted sadly. “Fred is calling himself Rapier, although he was Rodent for like three days.”

Severus liked the twins better when they feared and loathed him and most importantly they kept their distance.

“You do remember that you are not supposed to talk to anyone, don’t you Mr. Weasley?” pointed Severus. “I fail to see the necessity for codenames when you are not supposed to talk to anyone.”

“We have gone into hiding!”

“Precisely. Stay hidden, please.” Severus handed him the bottle with the Wofsbane, still hot, and a smaller one with a brew for sore muscles that Remus didn’t know Severus had created just for him. “Do you need anything else?”

“No, we're fine. Sick of eating rice and vegs.” George took the bottles carefully and grinned. Such a cheerful young man he was. Annoying, but also good given the circumstances. “I didn’t even know that eggplants were edible.”

It is so easy to make a mistake when you go into hiding. People grow sick of each other, or become restless from the isolation, or run out of supplies, and eventually they go out tired and irritable and unprepared and this is how they get caught. Severus knew this well, he had been present at Charity Burbage’s murder.

Thankfully, these four were good company and knew how to entertain themselves. Plus the tallest and strongest of them was also the one with more common sense so it was guaranteed that Remus would stop them from doing anything too stupid. Just because he and Sirius had had a target on their back for years Remus would not grow complacent and stop taking safety measures seriously. The Ministry now was not like it had been before. It was much more effective in finding and arresting people of interest. And the twins, blessed fools that they were, had merited that category.

Not only was there a kill order for both Fred and George, but there was also a reward for their heads and the prize was being increased every two weeks. It is not that Voldemort hated them in particular. Severus knew for certain that His Darkness didn’t even know how many Weasleys were around and which ones were loyal. (That Percy kid, he had explained to a fuming Fred, was probably the only
reason their younger siblings hadn’t been killed at the end of the course. He had managed to position himself surprisingly well. But the Weasley family had long been disliked by many of the pureblood houses and they blamed them for Dolohov’s fall, so even if Voldemort hadn’t declared the necessity to exterminate them they would have been hunted all the same.

The twins had in their apartment a framed copy of the official arrest order of the Ministry, with their grinning portraits and the ever increasing reward (now 500 galleons per brother.)

“I think, for myself, I am going to call me Knight, or maybe Tentacula.” George went on. It wasn’t fair that only Sirius and Remus got to have nicknames.

“Good day, Mr. Weasley.”

“Good bye, Serpentus.”

***

It could be thought, given his dramatic tendencies, that the Dark Lord was stupid. But do not be mistaken, Lord Voldemort was far from a fool. He was clever and he was intelligent (two different things, although very similar).

Voldemort made Severus Headmaster of Hogwarts. He had looked at him and seen a competent and loyal man. He had even rummaged on his mind and saw that the flame he once held for the muggleborn witch had dwindled, so there was no danger there (and people in love were so stupidly dangerous). This is why he trusted him with Hogwarts to keep hostage all the children of the wizarding society and mould them to his liking.

Voldemort had no idea of the truths that lay on Severus’ heart, but just because he believed him to be a devoted follower it didn’t mean that he trusted Severus wholeheartedly. That would be stupid, you see, and Voldemort did not kid himself. He knew very well that only half of his deatheaters followed him because of his promises of a clean and pure wizarding society. Bellatrix did. Crouch did. But others like Malfoy, like Pettigrew, followed his power in the same way that iron shavings go to a magnet.

Severus, he knew, followed him because of love, because he needed someone to embrace and accept him. Before his death Voldemort had been beautiful and charismatic and so had been his followers. It had been too easy to make Severus fall in love with them.

Severus was competent and loyal, as devoted as Bellatrix if less demonstrative about it. Voldemort trusted him with Hogwarts but he didn’t trust Severus with himself. He didn’t trust Severus with his own thoughts. Severus could get the idea that Voldemort’s approval wasn’t enough, that he could get others to love him like he loved Voldemort.

It was a lot of power for a single man. Hogwarts, after all, remained the most secure building in Britain (tied with Gringotts). It was a fortress that you could defend for months at a time. There was also something very important for Voldemort hidden there, not that anyone knew of its existence. But still, Hogwarts had strategic value and it was not be given away completely.

So with the castle Voldemort gave Severus something else. A reminder that he was not alone. A token of his one and only master.

It was perfect. The Carrows were loyal and too stupid to be convinced or manipulated to betray him. They were also very hot-headed and while Voldemort did not condemn violence precisely they were a bit or a nuisance, too selfish and hedonistic and given to ruin interrogations and long-term plans
because of their sadism. But Severus could deal with that and at last Voldemort had found a better use for them, away in Hogwarts.

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At least it wasn’t Peter Pettigrew. This is what Severus told himself. If it were Peter, he could not promise that he would not *crucio* him to death the moment he uttered the wrong word, which in his case would be any word.

(What Severus wanted to do, however, was to drown him in the lake with his own two hands, press his rodent face on the mud of the shore).

The Carrows weren’t that bad. True, they were sadistic and cruel to a degree that went past horrifying and almost became comical in its excessiveness, but at least they hadn’t betrayed their best friend and they didn’t lie. Severus spent most of his time lying to everyone and he had no patience for other people’s lies.

He wasn’t lying now, during the faculty meeting before the start of the term. He wasn’t lying as he told them of the new school policy drafted in accordance to Ministry guidelines and approved by the Board of Governors. No muggleborns whatsoever, halfbloods accepted pending confirmation of their status, radical changes in the curriculum (DADA was now simply DA). That the Carrows were coming was but a small addition to the long list of Severus’ sins.

Not only were the Carrows deatheaters, they were also rude and crass which made them intolerable to Severus even if their honesty was refreshing. He would also like to say they were stupid, given how astonishingly vulgar they could be, but the truth is that they were both unfortunately smart. More than capable wizards and terrifying duellist which made even more worrisome the fact that Voldemort had kept them down with him a few more days to give them some special instructions before they made their way up to Hogwarts. These were not the kind of people you wanted to learn new tricks.

One thing that they could say of Thicknesse’s government is that they learned from their predecessor’s mistakes. They would not have a repetition of the chaos and open rebellion they had with Umbridge.

Although given how Minerva McGonagall was looking at him, they might have something much worse. She looked ready to beat him to death with a fire poker. Frankly, he couldn’t blame her.

The faculty meeting finished quickly. Charity Burbage’s empty chair ensuring there would be no idle chatter and also no open defiance to Severus. Once they were done everybody vacated the room quickly. Flitwick looked heartbroken and even Slughorn seemed uncomfortable and he was a Slytherin.

Minerva stayed.

“I couldn’t believe it” she said. She was looking at the flames in the fireplace, her back to Severus because she was a very brave woman. “All these years when people suspected you, I could never believe it. But I was wrong, wasn’t I? You killed Dumbledore.”

So they had been talking about him. Severus knew that, of course, but it is always nice to get confirmation.

Severus didn’t like lying. It wasn’t a question of honesty, it was just that every lie created another knot to keep track in the thread of Severus’ thoughts. Saying the truth was always easier. Saying the
truth partially and misdirecting is easier and also very enjoyable. He did it all the time with Voldemort, let him taste the ring of truth in his voice and his mind and not suspect a thing about Severus’ true allegiance.

He said the truth now. Blunt, naked, truth.

“Oh, no, Minerva, I merely let him die.”

They said that all Slytherins were snakes, but Minerva turned around to him now like a viper that had been trodden upon.

“And you admit it… All those times I defended you, all those times I swore you were truly Dumbledore’s man.”

“You were wrong.” Severus said simply. He spoke with the calm and nonchalance with which one tells the time or what’s for dinner and perhaps this simplicity was cruel but it was better that sounding smug and cheerful over it. Truly, Severus didn’t want to be cruel to Minerva and he didn’t want to cause her more pain. But neither did he want to pretend he hated Harry and barely tolerated him yet he had had to do just that. He pretended to hate him when in fact he loved Harry so deeply that it had become something natural an ingrained in his being like breathing, like pumping blood.

There were many things he didn’t want to do and he did anyway because they were necessary. Keeping his cover was too important.

“This I can tell you Minerva.” He continued, and perhaps there was a bit of enjoyment on these words. “I was never Dumbledore’s lackey.”

True words, oh so true. What a thing, really, that everybody thought that there were only two sides of the war. That they insisted to reduce it so.

The way Minerva was staring at him right now, Severus was glad he was the master potioner at Hogwarts (Slughorn didn’t count, he wasn’t that good) because she looked ready to force feed him poison.

“I appreciate your continued trust, though. Don’t think I don’t. Although I imagine it wasn’t too hard to dismiss Mundungus and Moody’s misgivings. The latter suspects everyone and the first is simply an abysmal spy.” Severus smiled faintly because this, too, was true. “In fact I would dare say that just because I turned out to- well, it doesn’t make them right, not if they accused me for the wrong reasons. So you shouldn’t feel bad, Minerva.”

“I SHOULDN’T feel BAD!”

“It’s not like they saw something that you didn’t. They were just as wrong as you.” Severus explained casually, gesturing with his open hands and looking in that moment like the thirty something he really was rather than the old sour man he had been acting like for years.

The Order had more or less disbanded after Dumbledore’s death. There were little pockets of resistance here and there but they could not work together as they once did. Still, he wouldn’t like for anyone to criticize Minerva for her past trust on him. It wouldn’t be fair. Plus, he disliked most of the Order members. In fact he could go as far as saying that he only liked Minerva, despite the present fighting situation. He also liked Shacklebolt because he was efficient and on some days Molly Weasley.

(He disliked Molly and her short-sightedness, but the woman did once suggest to imperius the Dursleys and Severus could only approve of the feeling there.)
Minerva wasn’t alone in her fury and indignation with Snape. Just like with the legend of the golden apple and the competition to be named the most beautiful goddess, there were others who could claim that their boiling red hot anger surpassed Minerva’s.

Because Severus Snape had been made Headmaster of Hogwarts by Pius Thicknesse. Severus Snape, who they said had been slowly poisoning Dumbledore, Severus Snape the death eater, he was sitting on Dumbledore’s chair and Ginny couldn’t understand Ron’s nonchalance. She was so angry that her vision blurred and she accused him of being a sell-out, like Percy. She tried to hex him and they had a huge fight in which they said horrible things. Ginny called Ron off for not being a true friend to Harry and even wondered at what he might have said in the Ministry before his interrogations was interrupted by Bill’s accident.

And Ron, Ron acted as if he were barely insulted and he said she didn’t know what she was talking about, as if she were a little girl. In the end it was Fleur who put a stop to it. Ginny didn’t even had the comfort of Bill telling them to stop. It was Fleur who beyond her pretty face and her thick accent was an incredibly powerful witch and she got their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths for the duration of the evening.

(Ron just shrugged and went to read a book. Ron was reading books and Ginny didn’t recognize her brother.)

And that night Bill sat them both in the sofa and asked them to please play nice because he already felt like he had lost far too many brothers even if they were all alive. “Don’t let this pull you apart, please.” He had said and Ginny had deflated a little bit.

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There was, however, another angry woman. A strong competitor for the iron apple of Snape hate.

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“But, My Lord-”

“Enough, Bella, the repetition is tiresome.”

Bellatrix shut her mouth immediately and lowered her eyes demurely. She pouted. She had full lips that made her pouts pretty and alluring. A few steps behind her, her sister Narcissa who had thin lips made for sadness, remained stoic and silent.

More often than not Narcissa had been silent in the last few months and she had discovered a new kind of freedom and power in it. Lucius had congratulated her, and she had thought that she would die of terror at his words but he meant it truthfully. He did not understand. He did not know of the true power she had acquired.

Narcissa was quiet and she was quick and efficient and unobtrusive. The Dark Lord liked knowing that he would hardly have to snap his fingers before whatever he desired was presented to him on a silver tray held in Narcissa’s beautiful hands. Almost like a handmaid, she was, and in her house no less. But she was silent and full of grace and she didn’t cower in fear (she had stopped showing fear or any other expression in her face years ago), she did not stutter flatteries and platitudes and she did not beg.

In short, she was nothing like Pettigrew, grovelling on the floor and almost pissing himself in terror of the man he was serving. She was also significantly more pleasant to the eyes than him. She was
not like her sister, either. Narcissa lacked her voluptuousness and that permanent air of having just rolled out of bed, which put her at a disadvantage in getting more power from men. But she was quiet and so she was not demanding nor shrill and irritating. Bella did more for the cause and was more devoted, but in her silence Narcissa managed to look more dutiful and dedicated.

She stepped forward now and put a hand, such a white long hand like the wing of a swan, on her sister’s arm. Bella’s new protestations died mid sentence and she apologized.

Narcissa did not shudder at the pleased look that Voldemort gave her, no matter how intrusive his eyes felt over her body.

Of course Bella tried again later. She was a Black after all, more than Narcissa ever was. She was fiery and passionate and whatever measure of restraint she ever had it had been left behind in Azkaban. Her zeal was indeed irritating and it often surpassed the Dark Lord’s himself.

No. That would be anathema. You could not think that.

But Bella would see the whole world burn and she would laugh and dance in the flames. She would do that in a blink and so she couldn’t understand why her beloved lord didn’t rush to do just that.

She also didn’t understand why he hadn’t killed Snape, let alone kept him in his service, when it was obvious he was not a good follower.

You see, Snape didn’t go to Azkaban.

“Forgive me if I thought I would be of more use to our lord outside of prison, where I could secure a good position and keep working for him” Snape had said. His voice had the velvet of rose petals. “But I am sure that he appreciated your gesture all the same.”

Bellatrix had screamed and cursed him (and so did a few others than also went to Azkaban and kept enough senses with them to be allowed in company). But Lucius had laughed and there were many others who had clung to Snape’s words and the salvation they offered.

Now Voldemort had assigned Snape to Hogwarts and Bella cried at his feet for she was sure that it was undeserved. Not a true one, Snape was. Not even a pureblood. How could they not see? He had poison and honey in his voice and he was lying, lying to their Lord. He would bring disaster to all of them.

Narcissa noticed the Dark Lord bristled and exhaled with irritation.

“Are you doubting my decisions, Lestrange?”

“No, I…” there were tears in Bella’s eyes. Lestrange he had called her.

“Do you perhaps believe yourself better informed that your lord?”

“No, no…”

“Do you think me a fool, then, Mrs. Lestrange?” His voice was rising and Narcissa felt the muscles in her neck tighten instinctively at the sound of an angry male voice. “An imbecile easily deceived?”

Bella had dug her nails in her chest deep enough to draw blood, as if she wanted to tore her chest open and claw her own heart out.

“Not another word, then.” Voldemort’s voice was softer now as it always was when he saw blood or
tears. “Know that your lord moves his pieces where they are needed and nothing is done without purpose and clear intention.”

“Yes, my lord. Always, my lord.”

To be fair, Narcissa agreed with Bella (and that was an uncommon occurrence). There was something about Snape. But then again, there was also something about Narcissa, because as much as she had become Voldemort’s favourite servant, even if a domestic one, she did not care about him. This is what Lucius couldn’t see. All Narcissa wanted was to be alive and strong enough to protect her son. She had failed him before, but she wouldn’t now. Not now, not now.

They had called for his death after the mudblood rescue. They had called for his death with no chance for atonement and Narcissa couldn’t let it be so.

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Alecto and Amycus Carrow came to Hogwarts on a Thursday, three days before the official start of the term. The first night after their arrival there was a fight. Minerva came close to winning but she was no match for the two Carrows and Snape, who still had to keep up the charade because the Carrows had spent three days with Voldemort and he worried about those days. This is what people forgot again and again. The blood supremacy was stupid but the people that followed the ideology were not. They had a cruel streak and they would hit harder, always.

Thankfully Severus was able to convince them that Minerva’s defeat and humiliation was enough, that once defeated she would not try again for fear of what the Carrows could do. This was a lie they liked to believe just as they enjoyed threatening the rest of the staff with incarceration in Azkaban should they prove uncooperative.

Severus followed with a bored and unobtrusive air as the Carrows locked each and every one of the fireplaces of the castle. Every one. Even the ones in the kitchens and the professors’ room and certainly each and every one of the fifteen fireplaces in the dormitories. Pomona Sprout managed to keep a blank face through the process, but Flitwick seemed close to tears and Minerva was going to hurt her jawbone the way she was grinding her teeth as she granted them access to the Gryffindor tower.

They locked all the fireplaces and then they did the same with the mirrors.

And the three well known secret passages. (Plus another one Filch told them about).

They locked the aviary. The face Flitwick made after he saw them cast the last spell was a punishment all by itself. Severus had no doubt that given some time Flitwick would be able to lift all of the wards. But he doubted the students could do it and in any case it would not be quick and it would not be discreet and who would dare risk being discovered just for the chance to send a letter?

Finally, Severus walked with them around the perimeter of the castle’s grounds and he observed as they strengthened the already powerful wards. It was a tedious job and Severus was glad for their help. Alecto could cast a particularly strong arresto. Plus it seemed that they had recently learned some interesting things and they had brought some toys with them and once they were done no human would be able to come in or out of Hogwarts, not unless Snape gave his permission.

Non-humans were another matter. Severus noticed that the spell wouldn’t affect giants, for example, and would probably have less of an effect on werewolves. But for the time being all human movement was restricted, and it was just humans in the school.
(There was some doubt about Flitwick and Hagrid, but Amycus had laughed and showed him a box with enchanted iron collars on it. He looked disturbingly excited at the idea of using them.)

There would be no letters, no floo, no escape through the fireplaces or running through the forest. No contact whatsoever with the exterior world and the groups that still presented resistance, (what remained of the Order or the students that participated in the riots and had already graduated). This would not be like the year with Umbridge.

Voldemort had ordered Snape to make him another army, young and full of energy and perfectly indoctrinated. Young wizards and witches that would follow the steps of their parents or who would murder their own parents, but, in any case, who would consider Voldemort their ultimate and supreme Father. Voldemort had given Severus the Carrows to help him achieve this goal and he had given him absolute control of Hogwarts.

Severus became king of the castle, the ultimate authority of the building and the master of the keys and wards, the only one who could move freely in and out of what used to be a school. Perhaps if the Carrows were more temperate they would also have freedom of movement, but as it was now it was up to Severus to decide if they could come and go. Amycus was missing two fingertips in his left hand because he could not well leave that hippogriff alone, so everyone would understand if Severus did not grant him or his sister that kind of liberty.

It has been said: Lord Voldemort was far from a fool. He was aware of the power he had just given Severus.

There was a rosewood box in Alecto’s room. Goblin made and unbreakable by magic or hand. Only the right password could open it and any attempt to tamper with it would release a most terrible curse, like the one that had been in that family ring.

A lovers’ box, and wasn’t this delightfully appropriate? A box where you could leave a message to your beloved and it would appear in the twin box in their possession. It was beautiful and well crafted, decorated with flowers and interlaced vines, and inside this box there was a single piece of paper that still had traces of lavender perfume in it. It had been Narcissa who fetched Voldemort the paper and the quill, but she had been dismissed from the room as he wrote his secret instructions to Alecto and Amycus Carrow, his order to keep an eye on Severus and write a report of his actions. It was a lovers’ box and it was Voldemort’s insurance in case Severus were to betray him.

Severus had the keys of the castle but he was a prisoner as much as any of them.

Yet, on Severus’ rooms, on a different corner from where he brew the Wolfsbane, there was a crystal flask. There was a sweet smelling mixture, painstakingly prepared over two years, and it was ready for use.

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Perhaps Severus could be accused of being paranoid, but given he had survived over a decade as a traitor to both Albus Dumbledore and Voldemort, the two most powerful wizards of their time, he was inclined to say that paranoia was the healthy and appropriate answer.

He had plans for this year. Plans that didn’t involve playing mother to two demented sadists. Now that the castle had been locked down and he didn’t have to worry about unexpected visits or people talking, he quite naturally wanted to get rid of said sadists.

Except, of course, he couldn’t do such thing until he were sure that their sudden absence wouldn’t draw attention. The absence itself should be easy to cover since no one was supposed to come visit
Hogwarts. But their silence…

He had first caught a glimpse of Alecto’s mind as they came to Hogwarts and he briefly saw an image of Voldemort giving them something. By the third day he had a pretty clear idea of the contents of the box and the fact there was a password, but Severus would like to see that memory a few more times. After all, he knew that Voldemort had once planted false memories on his followers. What if it was a trap? He needed to get that word at the forefront of their minds to be absolutely certain.

Severus made an empty speech to welcome the students. No muggleborn had returned and the halfbloods looked afraid. Who wasn’t a halfblood these days? Even if both your parents were wizards and witches, the grandparents weren’t.

“And now, let’s hear some encouraging words from your Heads of House” he said with that well practiced smirk that in his face passed for cruelty.

Alecto laughed with that piggish laugh she had. Amycus smiled and Severus thought that as powerful and well trained as they were, they were incapable of letting pass an opportunity to enjoy people suffering, no matter how small and petty. He had not warned them beforehand that they would have to speak and the four professors were throwing him looks that went from hurt and betrayed to positively murderous.

While everybody looked at Professor Sprout sweating her way through a speech in which she tried to tell the students to keep fighting and give them hell but at the same time look like she was not doing that, Severus quietly casted *legilimens* under the table and had a good long look at the Carrows’ minds.

He saw the memory from two different angles and even Bellatrix talking to Amycus, but not Alecto, about it. So Severus knew the box was real and he knew Voldemort’s instructions. However, as it often happens with secrets, he couldn’t get the password until either of them actively thought about it, not if he wanted to be discreet about it. He would have to bring the idea of the box (and therefore treason) to their minds for Severus to be able to read it.

Not to worry. This is not hard for a Slytherin, not at all. They are experts at making you think the things they want. Severus had years of experience making people believe either that he was a traitor or that he was not. He would make them think that and he would get the password before they could do anything about that thought.

And then he would get rid of them because they were dangerous psychopaths and Alecto’s laugh was one of the most annoying sounds on Earth.

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More than the screams of pain of a *cruciatus*, what Amycus really enjoyed was the hurt expression, the wet eyes and fallen mouth when people realized they had been betrayed. When they saw they were alone and the one they thought was their friend was not.

So when that old pussy, McGonagall, said they could not torture students in the corridors (or at all, anywhere!) and that Snape would hear of it, Amycus let her call him. She would see. Her face would be better than any scream from whatisname he was about to torture.

Snape came not too long later, followed by the prefect who had gone call him and a couple of other professors, including the half-breed. Amycus had a bet with his sister that they could make the goblin thing kill himself out of despair, hopefully before the end of the week. He had been so upset at their
arrival! It was delicious. Really, he and Alecto had thought that they would be bored locked up here in the North with old serious Snape, but it looked like they were going to have a lot of fun. None of that “I told you we had to interrogate him” and “you can’t drive people mad with pain” or “we are not murdering halfbloods yet, what have you done?”

“And here I thought you would be able to give the first lesson of the day without the Headmaster’s assistance” said Snape, his voice like iron and coal and the sound of a train. Alecto laughed at McGonagall. Damn, but that Snape was a funny man.

“Severus- Headmaster” amended the witch at Snape’s rising of his eyebrow. “Professor Carrow here attempted to cast an unforgivable curse on our students.”

“Oh, dear we can’t have that.” Answered Snape. He said it so quickly that Amycus immediately recalled Bellatrix and her hushed accusations. It was no secret that she didn’t like Snape and if you didn’t go to Azkaban she considered you a traitor and a coward in any case, so you couldn’t take her too seriously. But Amycus remembered her words nevertheless, whispered in a hot breath into his ear. Do not trust that man, keep an eye on him for me.

Maybe later he would ask Alecto for the box. Bella would like getting any ammunition.

“So soon in the course” Snape tsked. He looked at Amycus and his lips did something that resembled a smile. “I understand the compulsion to kill the student, Professor Carrow, but I am afraid that we can’t tolerate that.”

“Of course, headmaster” answered Amycus, already feeling the warm tingle of pleasure at what was to come. Snape had looked him straight in the eye… “It is not the killing curse. Merely a disciplinary measure for some unruly students.”

“Blood traitors” interjected Alecto, spitting in the floor as if the mere words were tainting her mouth.

The students in question were two Gryffindors, which should be reason enough to punish them. The boy was just a boy wearing an ill-fitting cloak but the girl, oh the girl had a braid of red hair. She was a Weasley and frankly there wasn’t anything else to say about it. She and the other boy were both standing in front of an utterly terrified first year student. What the first year had done to merit the Carrow’s attention no one remembered, not even the Carrows themselves. It was probably something as simple as being a halfblood and still daring to look at them in the eye. But the important thing was that the two purebloods had stopped the punishment and confronted them.

“I see. Very understandable.” Snape nodded at them and held their gazes. What an intense gaze that Snape had. Everybody spoke of his voice, but when he looked at you like that, damn Merlin and Circe, it was as if he were peeling your skin to see what was below.

Bellatrix was a good lay but Amycus decided that if she wanted to destroy Snape she could do it herself. As long as the man let him play, he would keep writing that all was well.

“You have no right! You can’t do that to the students!” McGonagall was saying.

“I think you will find that the Headmaster gave us the authority” answered Alecto. There is no way to differentiate in modern English between formal and informal “you”, yet it was somehow clear that Alecto meant it in the most disrespectful way.

Amycus said nothing, relishing the way McGonagall’s lips trembled. Even when confronted with the truth, even with a loyal deatheater as Headmaster of Hogwarts they held to some imaginary hope that things would turned out well.
“Personally, I can’t say how many times I have wanted to curse a student.” Snape said with utter seriousness. Amycus could tell he was being brutally honest here. “And we can’t have such open defiance, it would only lead to the chaos of two years ago, don’t you agree?

“Severus, for Merlin’s sake!”

Severus did not care at all for Merlin’s sake. Merlin had been dead for centuries. “Every Professor is free to discipline students as they see fit. Specially, since they had made it obvious that the don’t care for the point system.”

“But, Sev- Headmaster” interjected the gobbling teacher. “Be reasonable, please. A cruciatus! They are underage!”

Again Snape’s dark eyes searched for Amycus’. Oh but Snape was fun.

“I trust Professor Carrow’s and Professor Carrow’s judgment completely.” Snape declared with finality. “Sweet?”

For a second, both teachers and deatheaters blinked in confusion. Snape extended a long fingered hand holding a small silver box. Inside were the proffered sweets, round little balls with an intense smell of apples, sweet and slightly tart. They smelled like a summer day. They smelled like everything good in the world.

He raised his arm quickly before Flitwick, the half-breed, could take one. It was unlikely that he would have actually taken one given how he was looking at Snape, choked with tears, but it was the hint of an insult and just for that Amycus accepted one of the little apple balls with a smug smile. It made the candy all the more sweet in his mouth. Alecto laughed at McGonagall’s flabbergasted look of indignation and took two. She opened her mouth to show Flitwick the sweets on her tongue.

“I think I will start with the girl, see how, hhhhigh she screams. And then” Alecto paused to give a huge yawn. She did not cover her mouth. “The boy.”

There were multiple cries from the Professors and the students. It felt as if half the school were standing on that specific side corridor of the third floor. Amycus yawned, too. Yawns were very contagious.

“Reducto!” screamed the girl, the blood-traitor harlot, before Alecto had raised her wand properly.

Alecto casted a protego non-verbally and the weasel’s curse became nothing more than a short shower of purple sparks. Nevertheless, the curse had been potent enough that Alecto slid a few centimetres back in the floor, which only made her smile more. They both liked it when the toys put up a fight and made a good game of it.

“Ohhh, you are making this all the more fun, little girl.” Amycus saw her sister initiate the zigzagging motion of a ripping curse. Maybe she would take her eyes out, or her tongue.

“Professor Carrow” called Snape with a slight frown, interrupting the completion of the curse. His eyes were hanging on Alecto’s face and Amycus wondered about it. He had always thought that Snape was Malfoy’s dog, but perhaps there was something here. He wasn’t sure if he would give his blessing or not. “You may not have had the opportunity to meet all the students, that defiant young man is Mister Longbottom.”

“Long- uuuaah- bottom, eh?” Alecto smiled and blinked twice slowly. “Maybe I will start with him then.”
The boy drew his wand up, for what little it would do. It would be nice to torture him with the *cruciatus*. Oh, Bellatrix would be beside herself when she heard that *they* had gotten the last Longbottom. Really, Amycus’ opinion of Snape was only increasing. Maybe he would let him bed his sister after all. Nothing more than that because he was not proper pureblooded, but he would allow this.

Why, but Amycus was feeling sleepy. The school hours didn’t agree with him. He couldn’t remember when he had last had to get up this early.

The boy adopted a duelling stance, arm slightly extended and body to the side. Alecto chuckled, yawned once more, pointed her wand at Longbottom and fell unconscious to the floor.

Many things happened then. Mostly, everybody looked around in surprise, particularly Longbottom who was staring at his wand as if he had never seen it before. Amycus looked between his sister, the boy and Severus’ impassive face.

“What did that boy do?” he demanded before turning to a snarl. “*What did you do?”* He would skin the boy and then he would eat him and make everyone look. No, he would feed him to his friends! Make them eat his heart.

“I… I…”

“Articulate as always” pointed Snape.

“I will show you what!” cried Amycus. He was so enraged he was feeling thick-headed, as if his head were full of cotton. His limbs felt heavier than usual. “*Cruc-*”

“*Expelliarmus!*”

Amycus’ wand jumped from his hand and flew across the corridor to fall at McGonagall’s feet. She had moved to stand between him and her students. If he weren’t feeling so tired she would never had gotten the wand from his hand. He was better than that.

“How dare you? How dare you bitch?” Amycus screamed, his breathing was heavy and his head was bobbing a little bit. Snape was standing there doing nothing, that rotten troll. Bella was right after all, he so was going to tell her. “Snape! Do something!”

Snape glanced at him, a slow and lazy movement of the eyes that conveyed pure disdain. Malfoy was the master of it, he probably taught that rat Snape how to do it. Lord, he had his wand in his hand and he was just standing there.

“*Help, Police, Murder*” said Snape with a dreadfully bored air. His words were followed by a giggle from a terrified second year halfblood Hufflepuff. The poor kid could not control himself anymore.

Amycus narrowed his eyes.

“What are you even-” he started to say, before joining his sister on the floor.

***

Severus stood over the unconscious bodies of both of the Carrows, looking completely unconcerned by their sudden attack of narcolepsy. He still had the small silver box on his left hand and his wand on the right. At last he turned slightly and his eyes went to the nervous Hufflepuff. His brow was slightly raised, as if daring him to say anything else.
“Oompa, Loompa, doom-pa-dee-do” sang the Hufflepuff, who could have gone to Gryffindor but for his love of musical theatre. “Weeee are not kneeling for You-Know-Who.”

“Five hundred points to Hufflepuff” answered Severus. His voice was the carefully modulated monotone of always, but he was smiling openly and it was terribly disturbing, even more that him giving points to Hufflepuff. “Minerva, will you join me in my office? Our two newest professors are indisposed, I am afraid. We will have to make some arrangements until we can find a replacement.”

Minerva was still staring at Severus, but her expression had changed.

“What happened to them?”

“Who knows? People fall asleep all the time. Every day, one could say, or every night if we want to be precise. Better leave them there undisturbed. I am thinking we could make Longbottom interim DADA teacher since he seems to have bested the last one in combat.”

“Severus.”

“I am sure there is some rule about it somewhere, and it would only be until I can bring his official replacement.”

***

The thing about Severus is that while he was paranoid (with good reason) and given to complex twisted thoughts he was also brutally practical. This is why when confronted with an abused toddler his first reaction was to immediately remove him from that place and figure out later what to do with him. This is also why he came with the brilliancy of raising said child with the help of a very public enemy of his. Severus was all about solutions.

Nowadays, Severus had:

1) A castle, turned school, turned prison. He was leaving the prison part be and keeping the wards the Carrows had so helpfully created because he knew that inevitably some of the students and maybe even a teacher or two would betray him if it meant winning the approval of Voldemort. There is no limit to what people do to save themselves. So yes, he was keeping the wards and the communication embargo and the movement limitations. It was nice knowing that no more deatheaters could come uninvited just as no one could go to The Three Broomsticks and babble their secret away.

2) Two empty teaching positions in the afore mentioned castle-school-prison.

3) A special werewolf friend whom he would like to keep healthy and alive and safe and maybe close to him.

4) Three other people (friends of the werewolf, not his) wanted dead or alive but preferably dead. All cooped together in a small apartment.

5) The Wolfsbane potion together with ache-relief potion to deliver monthly, thus risking giving away the hiding place of points 3 and 4.

It would be silly not to try to reduce this list. Hell, the child that wasn’t his but had become his somehow wasn’t even featured in the first five places and he was always in the backburner or Severus’ mind. That’s how busy Severus was. Harry didn’t even feature in the top five problems.

(Which was also good, because Harry was still hidden, hidden, hidden, and he had Draco and
Hermione with him and that meant he would be safe. Let Severus worry about everything else.

The sleeping Carrows were moved to the infirmary because otherwise Filch couldn’t sweep the floors underneath. Severus said this was a matter that the Deputy Headmistress could easily attend to as he had plenty of other things to do. Some of these things included forging a message on Amycus’ name saying they had found some opposition in Hogwarts but they were dealing with it successfully. He signed it and send it through the box, whose password was *Morsmordre Semper Fidelis* and Severus wondered what he seen in Voldemort. How could he had ever thought he was cool.

Such a stupid cheesy password, really.

***

“I brought you this, Minerva” said Severus in a perfect emotionless tone. Remus, however, could say that the voice had hints of sugar crystals melting into caramel and a suggestion of lemon and mint. But he didn’t because he was busy shaking the mud out of his shoes before stepping into the castle. They had apparated by the gate and had to walk through the grounds to the main door of the building. They didn’t mind, though, it was a nice evening and it had been a while since they could take a stroll through nature. He had enjoyed it immensely and was looking forward to more.

Minerva McGonagall accepted the tray of baklava with the puzzled and weary expression she always wore around Severus Snape these days. It was a difficult relationship, the one between Severus and Minerva. They had been teacher and student and then they had become colleagues and found something almost like grudging mutual respect and good-natured rivalry. At least until a certain child came to Hogwarts and Severus, although he understood her reasons, hated her none the less for her participation and the way she treated him. And then he had become a traitor, a poisoner, and she was the woman who wanted to kill him and then he was Headmaster and she was his employee and she still wanted to kill him and he was working in secret to ensure that the Carrows didn’t murder her.

He couldn’t say that they were friends but he wouldn’t say that they were enemies. Not anymore, not like two days ago.

“This is not an apology” Severus warned. “Do not take it like one. It is just a sign of commiseration and acknowledgement of the unpleasantness that is about to befall you. Have a good evening, Minerva”

“Sev- Snape.” She was still unsure on whether to call him by his name or last name and whether to use a professor or headmaster or not. Severus thought that every attempt at a Severus was a step towards new trust. “Umm, thanks. May I ask what is this about?”

***

Severus fled the scene without answering, taking with him a tall handsome gentleman that was just coming through the door and who, dear Merlin, was Remus Lupin. How had that child grown! Circe and Morgana, it was Remus. The one who took Harry, bless his heart, the one who went to Azkaban and escaped and then escaped again and couldn’t be found by the Ministry or the Order.

She really didn’t know what to think and so she was unprepared for the clamorous commotion that followed, a mixture of quick heavy steps and screams.

“Minerva!ProfeSSORMCGONAGALL!MinervaGonagallMinervaMinervaMinervaMinervaMinerva!”

Sirius Black, infamous prankster of the sparkling eyes, and Frederick and George Weasley, the big
surprise from the Weasley family and constant source of headaches and amusement, galloped into the castle screaming more or less in unison. The voices overlapped and it was impossible to tell who was saying what.

“Merlin’s beard Minerva! You have been a very naughty Professor, you. You can’t claim everyone is ‘the worst student I have ever met’ that is not possible there is only one and it was ME. Shut up, it was US. We see through you now, you are saying that to everybody. But, seriously, though, we were worse than the Marauders, weren’t be? Don’t listen to them, they have nothing on us. I understand, it was an empty declaration to strengthen your scolding, but I know you didn’t mean it, I am not angry with you Minny. We were truly the best pranksters. As if! Remember that time we stole a toilet? Remember that time we cursed a toilet to bite people in the ass?”

Minerva stared at the small (so small, clearly insufficient) tray of pastries and then at the corridor through which Snape had vanished, the bastard.

Sirius and the twins kept talking, demanding a declaration of who were the Most Mischievous and truly held the honour of being The Worst Student Ever According to Minerva McGonagall. If she wasn’t sure they could give her a reminder, they had already cursed two chairs and a suit of armour. No, they could not say which ones. Yes, they knew they had just arrived.

“Potter and Weasley, the latest generation. And Granger” said Minerva, although she wasn’t sure if she should include dear Granger in there. She still didn’t know if Granger was stopping them from doing worse or encouraging them somehow by giving them extra information. “That is my final answer.”

“But we made a portable swamp!”

“We became unregistered animagiiii!!!”

A bottle of whiskey is what Severus ought to have brought her.

***

There had always been some weirdness in Hogwarts. Always. This weirdness had been especially intense for the last thirty years or so, what with the jinx on the DADA position. However, this year would have to be remembered if only for how quickly everything went down. Most of the time the weirdness didn’t start until around Halloween, as if the castle or the curse wanted to let the new students settle for a bit before unleashing its thing. But this year everything had happened in a week and people had whiplash.

First, on the very first day of the school term the new DA Professor (not defence, of course, now with the new Minister) tried to torture the students. Even Umbridge waited a few weeks before letting her true face show. In any case. First day: Failed torture attempt + Sudden collapse to the floor. The Carrows were still sleeping, although they had thankfully moved them out of the way.

Then, for the next two days Neville Longbottom was, after the Headmaster’s insistence, excused from his normal classes so he could hold the DADA position. It was terribly awkward for everyone involved, especially Neville. He did tell them some interesting facts about plants, though, and they had a fascinating chat about carnivorous plants and whether or not they could eat someone.

On Thursday morning Headmaster Snape asked them all to welcome the new hires to replace the Carrows. The replacements were, this was important to note, escaped convicts.

One class, one single period of class with the new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor, Mister
Remus John Lupin and everybody 1) fell a little bit in love with him and 2) acquired a better understanding of Harry’s weirdness, his odd sweet and wild personality. It would eventually lead to point 3) gratefulness towards headmaster Snape for this appointment. Seriously. So grateful. Although Snape still refused to high five the students that offered their palms.

The students in Hogwarts currently in their seventh year had had so far two absolutely hopeless DADA professors, a decent one, a semi-decent one who turned out to be a death eater and thus put in question everything he ever taught them, the one person everybody agreed to hate, a competent jerk, and now him.

Remus had listened to Snape’s complaints and grievances for years, plus everything that Harry (and later Draco) had to say of their education. He came with a very good idea of what the Hogwarts’ students needed and thus he started teaching them how to cast a basic *protego* right away, to the indignation of the sixth and seventh years who couldn’t believe this was the first time many of them heard of the spell.

The first year class (a single group since this year they had received less children than usual), was full of nervous students who could barely levitate a feather. Yet Remus gave them a wonderful practical lesson on Defence Against the Dark Arts.

“Well done, Pegginton!” Remus exclaimed. “Very well done. See, everyone? This is how we defend ourselves.”

“This is less fun than expected” groaned George Weasley from the floor.

The first year students differed from this opinion. The first year students had just learned the very valuable lesson that you shouldn’t limit yourself to magic. They couldn’t do much with a wand yet, but Remus had presented them with An Enemy (George Weasley shooting pink paintballs from his wand in lieu of actual curses) and told them to find a way to get to the end of the class without any paint stains, or as few as possible. Extra points for whoever managed to retrieve George’s joke wand. About ten minutes before the end of the class Pegginton had achieved success in the exercise through collaborative effort with his friend Liddle. Liddle got on his hands and knees behind George, who was laughing maniacally chasing the kids, and Pegginton pushed George down and quickly jumped on his chest thus grabbing the wand.

Remus gave a chocolate frog to both kids and helped George up.

This wasn’t required for the exercise, but it should be mentioned nevertheless that once George volunteered for the position of DADA Teaching Assistant he decided he needed to dress the part. Which is why instead of his typical colourful attire, George had come with a modified black Hogwarts robe. The crest of the school and the house had been taken away and instead George had added the Morsmordre, the mark of Lord Voldemort. Or the alternative Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes version of the mark (available for 10 knuts, can be put on fabric or skin). Really, no wonder they had a price on their heads and that Snape had deemed it safer to bring them to Hogwarts. While the official mark had a snake coming from the mouth of a skull, the Weasley version had substituted the skull for… something else. The first years considered it the height of humour.

***

“Severus, we need to talk about your intentions with Remus.”

Severus took a while processing this and choosing an answer. He settled on “We?”

“Well, someone has to look out for Moony and his interests. He has no family around so the
responsibility obviously falls to me.” Sirius explained calmly, as if this were a very obvious and natural thing. He often did that, speak of a random topic as if it were a very plain thing. “I am four months older” he added. Obviously here seniority gave him more authority to meddle in his friend’s business.

Severus stared some more. He did not like Black because he was too used to disliking him, but they had similar positions on a surprisingly high number of topics and they both looked after the same people. Why you could almost say they were two sides of a coin. The unrestrained one and the one with a tight control.

“So, do you love him?” Sirius asked.

“Black, I don’t think that’s-”

“Of course it’s my business, I just explained. Answer the question.”

“The nature of my relationship with Remus is not a subject open to discussion.” All Severus could think was that thank Helga (not Merlin, Merlin wouldn’t help here, but Helga seemed like a gal that would), thank Helga there was no one around to hear this discussion.

“Do you love him, yes or no?”

“I…”

“Actually, you know what? I am gonna help you here. The answer is yes, yes you love him. It is patent.”

For once in his life Severus had no retort, no smooth answer to offer. Sirius waited, balancing on his heels. Had he picked that from the twins or was it the other way around?

“… Yes.” Severus said at last. It may be that this was the first time he came even close to saying the thought out loud.

“Good. Now the real question is: What are you going to do about it?”

Again, Severus tried to deflect the argument. “That is not-”

“Yes it is” interrupted Sirius once again. He actually rolled his eyes and put his hands over Severus’ mouth. He spoke quickly and loudly to drown Severus’ mutters. “It is my business when you are both dancing around and moping and doing nothing about it. You love him, he loves you and pay attention Severus because this is the one and only time I will share any of Remus’ secrets with you, he is my friend first and there is an honour code to respect.” Sirius made a pause to take air and enunciate his next words clearly and slowly for extra emphasis. “He loves you too.” His face softened as he said the words, his eyes losing a bit of that spark of madness. “And he doesn’t know how you feel and he is worried that you blame him for the arrest and Harry coming to Hogwarts and everything. Do you?”

Sirius took his hands away. Severus blinked after such an onslaught of words and information but his answer came fast.

“No. No, of course not.” He said, the words falling quickly from his mouth as if Severus couldn’t stand the thought hanging there in the air, unchallenged. What a horrible dirty thought that was. Blame Remus? When Severus was just as guilty if not more and nevertheless escaped Azkaban? “No, I don’t blame. How could I-?”
“And you love him.”

“Yes.” Look at that, it was easier to answer quick and sure the second time around. He didn’t know why he hadn’t said it sooner.

“And you want to be with him.”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. Now go tell him all this.”

And with that, Sirius took him by the shoulders and pushed him into an empty classroom, locking the door behind him.

***

The classroom hadn’t see any use in a long time. There were some worn decorations on the tables and a couple of purple and green chaise-longues, which told Severus it was probably the old Divination classroom from before Trelawney was hired and she moved to the tower for better ambience and undisturbed listening to the spirits.

It was a quiet, out of the way, and seldom disturbed room, with certainly more decoration and comfort than the Astronomy tower which undoubtedly was why Sirius had chosen it. It also currently held a slightly bemused werewolf who was entertaining himself looking at an old poster about tea leaves interpretation.

“Black seems to be under the impression that I need to make a declaration of my… sentiments.” Severus said because far it be from him to awkwardly stand in a dark corner unable to say a word. “State clearly that my admiration towards you has not diminished these past years.”

“You know, you are the one who wanted to be discreet.” There was a smile in Remus’ voice, and yes, as he turned away from the wall and walked towards him Severus saw he was smiling. What a beautiful smile he had. “And he is only half a day late.”

“I do believe he has locked us here.”

“Yes, I believe so too. Well then.”

***

Last night Severus had wanted to go slow as he reacquainted himself with the beloved body of his lover. He wanted to kiss and worship. He wanted to make him come just with the words he would whisper in his ear, show him that he thought only of him, wanted only him.

But he didn’t get the chance because once he kissed Remus; or Remus kissed him, it was a point of contention who had given the first step, but in any case once their lips met all of Severus’ carefully planned fantasies vanished out of his mind. There was no room for fantasies when he now had to direct every resource of his mind to appreciate the sensations and record in his memory the feeling of Remus’ lips against his own. Plus the feeling of Remus’ short beard on Severus’ skin (jaw! neck! Oh dear) and under his fingers. The hair at his nape grown long enough to curl slightly, long enough that you could bury a hand while a tongue caressed your mouth and sent a tingling sensation all the way down to the soles of your feet.

And his smell, oh Merlin, his smell.
Severus would have happily spent fifteen minutes just licking and kissing Remus’ throat. There was the throat itself, but also that beautiful place under the chin and the line of his jaw that he could bite playfully as he made his way to his ear. There was so much to lick and suck and bite and kiss in apology.

But Remus had other ideas. Remus growled and pawed at his clothes and apparently had no intention to take all night long because he went after all of Severus’ kinks in quick succession, biting at his neck and collarbone, carding his fingers through his hair and grabbing a handful, pulling slightly, not enough to cause pain but enough to feel overpowered. Remus mouthing at his nipples (how had he? He was still wearing clothes, rumpled clothes pulled aside to reveal the flesh) while he held both of Severus’ wrists in one hand and Severus was so hard and so overwhelmed not just by the sensation but by the fact that Remus was doing *everything*, everything he liked even when Severus hadn’t told him about most of it. Remus must have observed and guessed and memorized. He remembered the involuntary whimpers that came at the feeling of restraint, of so much strength and power holding him. He remembered how Severus liked to be possessed, be claimed, but was too proud and careful and scared to ask for it. And then Remus went down to his knees, keeping Severus pressed to the wall with a strong arm over his hips, holding him upright as he blew him, because he knew this too, he remembered this, and Severus couldn’t utter any proper words for a long time.

But that was yesterday, that was last night after they finally got their much delayed talk and cleared the air. Today Severus was resolved to having things his way as he straddled Remus on a chair and took his time to lick that damned throat and whisper all the filthy images he could conjure with a voice that was like a bed warmed by the sun. Today he could go *slow* and show his appreciation. At least until Remus couldn’t take anymore and he rose, lifting Severus with him (which, gah!) and shagged him over a table even though there was a perfectly serviceable chaise-lounge not three steps away.

***

Eventually they did move to one of the chaise-longues to lie in a blissed state and wait. Sirius either thought that it would take them longer to talk or he was truly optimistic about their stamina, but in any case he hadn’t returned to open the door yet.

Of course they could try *alohomora*, but it being Sirius he most likely had used a strong locking spell and as long as they stayed inside that old classroom there would be no war and Severus wouldn’t have a hundred things to do.

“So I spoke with Professor Slughorn” Remus said shifting his posture. His arms came to encircle Severus and draw him back. “We all did, during a break in the teacher’s room. You know, he was quite perplexed by the Carrows.”

“Show him some water boiling next, he will be absolutely befuddled” Severus spat, to Remus’ immediate laughter. Really, it was a wonder considering how much had Remus suffered since he was a child how could he keep such a sense of humour.

“He said that even the most potent Sleeping Draughts rarely last more than a few hours.”

“Wrong. There are well documented cases of day long sleep.”

Severus didn’t like Slughorn and truly the root of it was simply that Severus was a better potioner. He was better, had always been better, but Slughorn never recognized it. Sure, he gave him good grades, but did he invite Severus to his little soirees? No. Not that Severus wanted to go to the stupid parties, but perhaps if he had been invited he would have gone and gotten the opportunity to talk to Lily again and apologize. He might have befriended some different people and Severus wouldn’t
have been alone and what’s more lonely and ripe to be ensnared by the combined spell of Voldemort and Lucius.

Then again, perhaps nothing would have changed. The one time he got to attend one of Slughorn’s little parties was after Hogwarts and as Lucius’ guest. Lily hadn’t been there. It was the month of her wedding and she had been too busy. It was also the month when Severus made a vow of his own, and got a mark on his arm, and Lucius kissed him in celebration. He had told himself he was happy with that.

“What about the Draught of the Living Death?” Remus asked. He was tracing a path with his lips, from Severus’ ear down to his shoulder. It felt like forgiveness and benediction. “Slughorn said that’s what you must have used” a playful bite to the top of his shoulder, followed by a small kiss “but it doesn’t sound right to me.”

“The Draught of the Living Death sends the victim into a profound slumber not unlike death and it is recommended with bigger creatures, such as trolls and giants.”

“Mmh.”

“But it can easily be counteracted with Wiggenweld.” Severus went on. “A couple of drops in the lips are enough to reverse the effect and wake the person.”

Remus rested his cheek on Severus’ head. It was nice. It was, in fact, excellent. In a few minutes they should see about getting dressed because like hell he was letting Black catch him in a state of disarray, but for now it was really good being able to rest together, skin to skin.

“I remember brewing Wiggenweld in class some time before we took the OWLs” Remus said at last. “An intermediate healing potion, isn’t it?”

Severus hummed his affirmative. There was an advanced version, of course. It all depended on the potency, but for the most part Remus was correct.

“Severus Snape, you did not allow such an easy opportunity for someone to awake the Carrows. Not after that little maggot sold Hermione Granger.”

“Of course I didn’t. I don’t trust these people.”

“So…?”

So Severus could just as well have poisoned the two of them and be done with it but there was a bunch of reasons not to. First of all he was not in a rush to become a murderer, current corpse-hiding spots notwithstanding. Second, if they were alive, even if asleep, then Severus wouldn’t have to lie to Voldemort outright. This made a big difference in legilimentia. He could say the Carrows were just as they were the week before and it would be true and it would sound true and His Darkness wouldn’t feel like riffling through Severus’ mind.

But Remus was right, he would not leave an easy escape either. Which is why he had taken the extra effort to brew the ultimate, or rather the original Draught of Living Death.

No one was waking from that without a true love’s kiss. If there was no one around to do it and the Carrows were trapped in eternal slumber, well more is the pity. Severus thought they were far more deserving of unending nightmares than a poor orphan girl.

***
Severus, in all his wisdom, made Fred a DADA Teaching Assistant too because he understood that the twins shouldn’t be let to their own devices and should be occupied at all times lest they decide to find their own entertainment. Frankly he couldn’t understand why Minerva didn’t make them prefects. It would have forced them to behave.

In any case the twins accepted the position with enthusiasm and Remus put them to work immediately. It was all fun and games, but it was also much needed training. They were unprepared for the war and while Hogwarts was safe at the moment they should still learn how to get out of the way of a curse.

Soon, with the exception of the teachers because the twins still had some decency in them, everyone in Hogwarts was sporting pink stains in them signalling where the twins had gotten them. They were not limiting themselves to DADA class either, because they argued (in a decent mimicry of Moody) that one ought to be always prepared. You thought you wouldn’t be attacked in the bathroom? Well, think again! This is Hogwarts, bathrooms are dangerous! *Always. Prepared.*

It could be argued, giving that the twins were now running madly around the castle and attacking its occupants with pink dye, that Severus had made things worse, but he disagreed. The twins would have done something like this in any case and at least now their chaos had a purpose. He was proud to say that the Slytherins had soon started to carry pocket mirrors with them to check around the corners. Most students still couldn’t cast a decent *protego* but the Hufflepuffs had figured that they could do a collective one and were now walking around in a phalanx formation. They kept the first and second years in the interior of the formation, like a pack of zebras protecting their young.

The next Tuesday saw every single student in Hogwarts with pink stains in their skins and robes, the two notable exceptions being Ginevra and Ronald Weasley.

Ginny did not have pink stains, Ginny *was* pink. Head to toe, included the hair and the eyelashes, all of her was one big collage of pink dots.

(Loxggood had gone to her, kissed her cheek and put a yellow bow on top of her head. Nobody knew why).

Ginny was a very talented witch and everybody had learned to fear her jinxes. But she was too focused on the offensive and because of that she had yet to master a decent *protego* against her brothers’ paint balls as demonstrated by her current state. The twins claimed that they were just giving her the opportunity to practice and after all it was just paint.

Of course their focusing on her had much to do with the fact that today it was pink paint, but one day it may be an actual curse and Ginny was not allowed to have anything bad happen to her. She had cashed out her allowance on bad things in her first year of school. From now on, she was required to be healthy and happy, and she could not get hurt, not at all, did she want her brothers to go prematurely grey?

The other exception in the pink madness was Ron who, to everyone’s bewilderment, remained impeccable. There were a few students who had avoided the twins quite well. Neville had eluded them for days until they finally got him in ambush and shot him at close range (he had three shots on his forehead). Luna had also done pretty well because she could walk very silently when she wanted, and there was a second year Slytherin who was fast and nimble and jumped away from their wands like a cat until Theodore Nott just pushed him their way. All of them had less than five stains on their bodies, but Ron had none.

“Honestly, I don’t know why are you all acting so surprised.” He said to a variedly pink audience. Seamus Finnigan looked as if he had measles. “They are my brothers, you know. I had to grow up
Ron, like Percy, was easily overshadowed by the more explosive and flashy performances of his siblings. Ginny in particular, with her choleric character and her excellent jinxes, came on top of Ron. But Ron was not the runt of the group, not at all. Ron had slowly and painstakingly come to master a subtle non-verbal almost motionless magic, ever since his first year of school when he smuggled his wand to use during punishments. You would not see Ron cast anything, but he was, all the time. All. The. Time. Like someone compulsively pressing the save button on a computer. This was Ron, only with magic, defensive magic. It was now past conscious habit and it had become a tic.

Look, his brothers turned his favourite teddy bear into a spider, when he was on his second year a teacher tried to obliviate him, and the next year he was mauled by an over-enthusiastic Black (“so sorry, Ronald. Do you want a broom? I will get you a broom. Or better yet, a flying motorbike. I am sure you will look great in leather”). Note that he very generously was leaving the first year out, because it was the one time in Ron’s life when he actually went looking for trouble. Every other time the trouble came to find him.

It was only natural, given that he lived in a magical household where he could practice magic during the summers, that he would practice all the protective spells he could learn. He lived with Ginny, too, in case people had forgotten that. It was mere survival instinct on his part.

(Oddly, Percy had been quite helpful. He gave him tips and let him borrow his notes).

By the time he was starting his fourth year, it wasn't that Ron could cast *protego* in his sleep, it’s that he did. Constantly and absentmindedly. On himself, on Harry, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, Luna (for heaven’s sake that girl was too fragile, someone should look after her). Really, he was casting *protego* on everyone all the time.

Remus came out of nowhere and gave him a chocolate frog and a pat on the shoulder. The twins tried to shoot him right then because they could see he had both hands unwrapping the frog, yet the paint bounced off harmlessly.

It was a bit of a nuisance, this zeal of the twins, but having them back in Hogwarts was great. They had left the Burrow a little over a year ago, and before them it had been Bill and Charlie (and Perce, although he was so quiet it took a while to learn to miss him). Ron and Ginny were used to having their older brothers move away, but it was fantastic having them back nevertheless.

Hogwarts was different, and that was good, most of the changes were good, but the Gryffindor tower had become too hollow. First when Harry left and took with him the spark of life, the music and the laughter and the candy (he always shared his candy, they never noticed until he was gone). Then they had lost Hermione and they had to learn to study by themselves and mostly Ron saw no point in saying something funny if she wasn’t around. And they were fine, Harry and Hermione, they were fine, but they were somewhere else and so Gryffindor was a bit too empty.

This year it was Dean missing and suddenly the bedroom was too big for Seamus, Neville and Ron. Too big and empty. They had been thinking about moving out to a dorm in another house, but the obvious choice was Hufflepuff and they just couldn’t go to the bedroom where Ernie Mcmillan still slept.

(He had returned to Hogwarts this year obviously thinking that people wouldn’t dare bullying him anymore, pureblood and loyal to Voldemort as he was. And it was not as if they wanted to hurt him, although Ron still wanted to punch his face and had done that in the train, it was that Ernie was here, he was able to return despite everything, but Dean was not).
So yes, having the twins back was fantastic. They could not fill those absences, but they could smooth the edges and make them hurt less.

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After hearing that Headmaster Snape was making Muggle Studies compulsory for all students Sirius Black volunteered to become the professor for the subject.

“Do you know anything about muggles?”

“Oh, no. I am as pureblood as they come. Look at the eyes, look.” Sirius batted his lashes over his eyes, which were indeed a peculiarly deep and intense shade of blue. “This is not a dominant trait. You don’t get these eyes mixing the bloodline.”

“But you want to be the professor of Muggle Studies.”

“I know about bikes and music and I once rode on the back of a muggle car.” Sirius explained in that reasonable tone of his.

Snape made a show of thinking about it.

“You are certainly more qualified than our last teacher.”

And so Sirius Black, alleged muggle-murderer and the firstborn of a supremacist house, became the new Muggle Studies professor. He did not have the kind of organizational skills to prepare lessons plans and he did not have much knowledge of the subject matter, but he was a good conversationalist and he had lots of enthusiasm. The class soon became a seminar in which Sirius recalled something muggle he had seen, tried to explain how it worked, and all together debated its merits.

Since he did not advocate for the extermination of all muggles, like Amucus did, he was certainly a better choice. And his class wasn’t worse than what the late Charity Burbage had done. Not better, since she actually knew something about the matter, but not worse given Sirius’ joyful nature. He had no idea of how to grade the class but he had already promised that the best students of each year would get to go for a ride on his flying bike at the end of the course.

(Hopefully it would be back in condition by then. He had cried actual fat tears and hyperventilated when he saw that Hagrid had left his beloved bike outside, in the elements, all these years. No amount of polishing could repair the damage).

Sirius told them about bikes and lightbulbs and music; and then, when a student asked, about realizing your family was mostly composed of lunatics and leaving the place before turning seventeen and building your own identity separated from all that crap. That was a good class. So was the one in which he half-remembered a passing comment of Harry about instructional safety videos in school and Sirius began an exhortative speech on consent, protection, and behaviours that should not be tolerated.

Only the Slytherins had a certain familiarity with the topic. No one else had told them about it. No one ever told them that it was okay to say “no”. There were all these conversations about loyalty to your family and your Hogwarts house and tradition and no one had told them that it was okay to step away from it, either. All they had was Draco’s example.

Sirius Black was not an effective professor of Muggle Studies, true, he would be the first to admit it. But he accidentally became a counsellor and he was pretty good at it. Also oddly similar to Severus Snape in a way no one, certainly not them, would had expected.
“Do you need something, Miss Lovegood?”

“No, thank you sir.”

Severus noticed that Lovegood was wearing orange shoes peeking under her robes and pumpkin earrings. She was also standing right next to him with a beatific expression.

He moved to the balcony that oversaw the stairs between the east and north wing to check the passage of the students there. The girl followed him.

The girl followed him.

After a while Severus learned to ignore her presence and after two days he offered her tisanes on the occasions when she followed him back to his office. Apparently the girl just liked standing next to him. Severus wished she wouldn’t do that, but telling her to go seemed like too much bother and she kept quiet and didn’t make a nuisance of herself. She certainly wasn’t worse than the other female students that through the years had come to his office seeking comfort and advice.

(He always gave the same advice regardless of the problem: Dump him. No, you can’t take a beauty potion. Focus on your studies instead. Because I want one of my students to become Minister for Magic and he is not going to be the one, is he? That’s what I thought. Your hair is fine. No, that is not okay, if you tell me that you plan to poison him then I have to intervene.)

And

(You have three female prefects to answer that kind of question if you don’t want to talk to Madam Pomfrey, I am a man, what do I know about that?).

Chapter End Notes

I have never cared much for Roald Dahl, but some of his works are extremely quotable, especially the 1971 adaptation of “Charlie and the Chocolate factory”. This is the second time Severus had done this, too!
Also, I strongly recommend taking a break here if you need it. You know what that means.
Past enemies never gone

Chapter Notes

Warning: I don’t even know how or what to warn for. Just that the first few scenes made me sad and uncomfortable. Dark images all around.

It is so easy to think of war and evil as something that happens exclusively to young people. Young and beautiful and heroic, fighting across the land.

It is so easy to forget that war doesn’t respect any spaces, it certainly doesn’t respect the elderly and the ugly and the sick.

It was made obvious, under the new regime that not everyone was equally deserving. Not everyone merited receiving an education, or possessing a wand, or getting medical assistance. Certainly not the muggleborns, but neither did the halfbloods who would taint the facilities with their presence. And the blood traitors. Well, they had made their choice, hadn’t they? They had decided to become polluted. You couldn’t just corrupt yourself and then expect to still receive the treatment befitting a true pureblood. Not when you insisted in not acting like one.

That is the thing about war, it affects everyone even in the things you have taken for granted. Those things are in fact the first to go.

Take her, for example. She had spent fourteen years, fourteen years, in a cold cell in which everything was hard stone and iron and unforgiving wood. She had spent fourteen years dressed in a coarse tunic, without a comb for her hair or a soft ointment for her dry skin. Fourteen years of cracked lips and plain food and a single smelly piss pot in a corner. She had been affected by the war, and they had taken from her things she never expected that it would occur them to take. Not only her jewelry, the ruby earrings she had been wearing at the time of her arrest, but smaller things like her shoes and her stockings.

She had not been allowed to have socks. Fourteen years of bare feet and cold toes and one single piece of underwear.

And now they found themselves once again in an open war, a war that they were winning. Now she was affected differently and she had the finest stocking around her legs. Now she lived in the warmest rooms, rooms in which there was always a fire and she could wear nothing but the thinnest and softest fabrics. Now the merchants set aside the finest delicacies for her, the sweetest and freshest foods.

Now she slept with silk sheets in her bed and as she lay there with the husband she barely remembered how to love Bellatrix Lestrange had a thought.

Wouldn’t it be neat if they were to go and finish what they started? They had waited for the return of their lord and they had been rewarded. But it occurred to her now that just as they had waited for the Dark Lord others had been waiting for them.

“Shall we pay a visit to the Longbottoms, Rodolphus dear?”
It had been said that Ernestina Pileski was the huffiest huffle to ever puff. It was a joke between her friends because she cared so damn much about everything. No wonder she had become a mediwizard and later worked in the thankless long-term ward rather than the more interesting magical accidents. She cared about her patients and about her job and she always tried to do her best, tirelessly, even if they saw little to no progress. She argued that if they did nothing maybe they would see them deteriorate, so no signs of progress could be a good thing. Just because someone wasn’t going to get better it didn’t mean you should stop helping.

Now Ernestina was crying and although she tried not to make a sound, it meant she couldn’t speak. Her chest was heaving and her face was an ugly red because Ernestina had yet to learn how to cry in a pretty way. Her boss, Lorna Elderberry, threw her a disgusted look as she went to welcome their visitors to the ward, Mr. and Mrs. Lestrange.

Lorna, as opposed to Ernestina, didn’t particularly care about her patients. She had taken the long-term ward because she saw it as an opportunity to become chief of ward at age thirty-two and if she managed to pull a couple of miracle recoveries then she would have a very decent shot to make it to head manager before ten years had passed. Not in St. Mungo, perhaps, but some other institution. Lorna was a Slytherin. She had ambition.

“Pileski, take this man away from Mrs. Lestrange” Lorna said with that damned enunciation of hers, every word drawn in crystal. She was two steps ahead of Ernestina but of course it was not up to her to do it.

“You have such lovely hair, my dear. So do I! It is in fact one of my most striking features, the first being my smile of course. Five consecutive times winner of Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award.”

Gilderoy Lochart demonstrated his award-winning smile on Bellatrix, who seemed undecided on whether to be amused or insulted. His hair was not as carefully coiffed as when he entered St. Mungo, but the smile was still very good.

“One of our worst cases, I am afraid.” Lorna explained as she stopped in front of the Lestranges. And here was a woman who knew how to walk in high heels. Lorna was also the kind of woman who never got lipstick stains on her teeth and her eyeliner looked like the one in the magazines. Ernestina never managed to get it even and one eye always had more black than the other, but Lorna always looked ready for a photoshoot or a dinner party with the Minister.

“Severe memory loss together with delusions.” She said. “The problem, of course, is elucidating whether the delusions were part of the original personality or not. Fascinating, yet tiresome.” She smiled. Today she was wearing dark green lipstick that matched her shoes and she looked fantastic.

“To what do we owe the honor of your visit, Madam?”

Bella smiled. She was still a very attractive woman, so much so that most people managed not to be disturbed by the madness coming from her eyes.

“Oh, I just thought I would come see some old friends.” Bella spoke as if everything were a joke to her, somewhere between a pout and a mocking tone. “Never liked leaving things unfinished.”

“Well, I have been known to leave many a young witch finished yet undone” peeped Lockhart happily as he wagged his eyebrows and flashed once again his award winning smile. He remained completely unaware of the glacial response to his words.
“Pileski” called Lorna, cold and detached. Ernestina nodded and sniffled and hurried to take Lockhart by the elbow and gently guide him away.

“My apologies.”

“No need. He is most entertaining.” Bella’s eyes were fixed on Lockhart’s backside as he was taken away. He blew her a kiss over his shoulder and tossed his blonde mane three times.

“I suppose he could be considered so.” Lorna said perfectly aseptic. She smiled once more but she didn’t show her teeth this time. “Shall we see about the patients that brought you here, Madam, Sir?”

She had that perfect speak. Polite without being so obsequious as to imply you were far below, but respectful enough to say that even though they were all Slytherins and pureblood here, some were better than others. Bella liked the tone and she liked her. She had addressed her before her husband.

“Frank and Alice Longbottom, if you please. I think we will be relieving you of the burden of hosting them.” Bella spoke as if she were doing a favor to a friend. As if she had just handed Lorna a napkin or a pocket mirror.

“Ah.” Lorna raised her eyebrows ever so slightly. This was the key, this was the big part.

“Loong-bottom” the name left her lips in ice and smoke. “Terribly sorry to hear that. Pileski, do stop your blubbering and bring me the file for Longbottom, F. and Longbottom, A. L comes after K, darling.”

Ernestina took a big breath of air and dabbed quickly with her sleeve at the tears that had come to her eyes when she heard the name. She nodded and went to retrieve the files and in the meantime Gilderoy Lockhart wandered back to the room and started to lean seductively against the wall.

“Is there a problem?” That was Rodolphus, the first time he had spoken since he set foot in the ward. Interesting man, he had nothing of the beauty or the allure of his wife. Even though Bellatrix’s appearance was… unorthodox, she was still magnetic. Rodolphus on the other hand was badly shaven and gaunt, sporting deep shadows under his eyes and he emitted a pungent smell. Of course, although Lorna was mostly interested in the advancement of her career, she still had medical knowledge. She could see at a glance that someone had not taken the proper steps to recover from long-term dementor influence. She could see the disruption in sleep patterns and the alcoholism, plus a bit of malnutrition.

Or perhaps he had always been disgusting, who knew?

“Not at all, Mister Lestrange.” Lorna answered easily. In the background Lockhart changed posture, still resting against the wall but now trying to showcase his ass. “It is simply that Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom no longer receive medical care in this institution. We can’t simply treat certain people here, you understand. Frankly it is shameful that they had been tolerated so long, but I suppose their so called pureblood status helped in preventing an earlier release. Ah, thank you Pileski.”

Bellatrix did not look happy at hearing this. Ernestina trembled and moved slightly behind Lorna, as if afraid of the power of Bellatrix’ gaze. Lorna for her part opened the file completely unconcerned by the murderous deatheater standing in front of her and the sobbing mediwitch cowering behind. Her nails were freshly done, a rich deep green that was almost black. Narcissa would approve.

“I am sure we have their current institution on file. This will only take a moment… Let’s see, admittance, diagnosis and symptoms… Not much improvement through the years I see… ah, release! Oh, well, this is inconvenient.” Lorna finally rose her eyes from the folder and looked back at Bellatrix. “I am afraid no one would take charge of them so they were simply released on the streets.
Still, they can’t have wandered very far away in their state. Pileski, are you there?”

“Yes, madam.”

“The Longbottoms, Pileski.”

“You told me to take them to the riverbank, madam” Ernestina managed to say through the tears and the heaving breath. “Lest they found their way back inside.” She said no more, her voice lost in her sobs. Her mascara was terribly smudged.

“So thoughtful of me.” Lorna tapped the file with a nail. “What a pity, had I known of your interest sooner I would of course have held them for you. I am truly sorry that I can’t be of any more assistance.”

“Understandable” Bellatrix conceded. “You have to keep this place free of vermin, after all.” Ernestina sobbed harder at her words.

“Precisely.”

“Could they still be around?” Rodolphus’ voice was broken, as if his tongue weighted heavily on his mouth. He was not used to talking.

“I suppose so, yes” answered Lorna with just a shrug of her left shoulder. “If they found some cover and remembered to drink water every other day or so. Once they are out of my care they are not a concern of mine, but from a medical standpoint I would say they could survive for a week at the most.”

They thanked her and Lorna made some more polite talk and then Lockhart came closer and said he was late to a photo session but of course he could spare five minutes for a fan, specially one as lovely as Bellatrix. Soon after the Lestrange were gone.

“Honestly, Pileski, how can you still be crying?” Perhaps Lorna sounded dismissive, but she was honestly curious. Had she been crying for so long she was sure she would be dizzy by now.

“Sorry, madam.”

“Take five minutes to compose yourself and drink some water. You must be dehydrated.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Not a calming potion, though. They are highly addictive. You must learn to control yourself.”

“Yes, madam.”

“You did well, though. I don’t expect we will see them again.”

“You think so, madam?”

“We will see. They may want you to show them where exactly did you leave the Longbottoms and after today’s crying spectacle they will be expecting some little secret. If they ask, wait four questions and then tell them that you knew they would die if let alone by the river and that you felt sorry for them; so you left them on the muggle street to The Leaky Cauldron hoping they would find their way inside or maybe someone would take them in. Understood?”

Ernestina sniffled. “Yes, madam.”
“Good. Go, now.”

It has been said before, Slytherin/Hufflepuff relations are terribly dangerous. A Hufflepuff will be willing to risk their life hiding patients in their home for as long as necessary, forever if that’s what it takes. A Slytherin will be the one to foresee that they have to do it, and will devise the plan to make it possible and lie to the face of an unhinged sadist.

Not to say that Gryffindor/Ravenclaw relationships are a thing to be dismissed. The last thing a fearless person needs is someone feeding them knowledge and requesting their help with research. This is the basis of dragon studies.

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Percy was more and more convinced that wizards had got it all wrong. The fact that they were engaged in a war would support this theory, but it didn’t have anything to do with that, or not much. What he meant is that they saw muggles as weaker and beneath them. Either to kill and enslave them, or to protect them, but in any case weaker and stupider than them.

Percy was not his dad, he did not share his fascination with muggle ingenuity, but he did pay attention to his father. More than any of his brothers, actually, not that it was ever appreciated. Percy was never appreciated. (Not a complaint, just a statement. At the moment that lack of appreciation was what allowed him to work unnoticed. Hooray for ignored middle children).

(Side note: He should check with Ron, because Ronald was also very much a middle child like him and it occurred to Percy now that his little brother might be sitting on some big secrets of his own.)

Percy digressed. He was doing that more and more lately. His mind split with the present and the thousand futures that opened before him. What would be, what could be, what was going to be but was not anymore because Percy intervened, the new future that came to take that place… But also the million of present ideas he had to hold in his mind. All the names, and places, and connections and plans. His mind was full of side notes and threads.

He was so tired.

But, what he meant. Muggles, yes. Not as big a fan as his dad but he listened enough that Percy could move through muggle London unnoticed (something that his father, sadly, was unable to do). Percy could sign himself for yoga classes, because here came the point muggles had things that wizards did not and those things were better. Wizards had got it all wrong, muggles were the ones above them.

Case in point: The family size bag of Walkers Percy had just eaten all by himself.

He was full of crisps and salt and regret and his lips and tongue hurt. He also felt so good. So good. Percy upended the bag on his hand, letting the small crumbs fall on his palm and licking them from there. No shame. Percy was single-handedly toppling down a madman. No one was allowed to judge.

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Percy went outside and bought himself eight, eight! different bags of crisps. There was red and green and blue and dark pink and dark blue? or possibly purple, and brown, and a lighter brown and some kind of dark red to represent bacon. He didn’t eat them all at once. He rationed them, for the days when he did something particularly good and he deserved an award (saved the Edgecombes, like a boss!) and for the days when he failed and he needed a reminder that there was more to life and that
he was not to blame, not too much, if he couldn’t save everyone.

***

Draco was occupied on sucking Harry’s bottom lip and finding that this was a nice thing and that he liked it, just as he liked moving his hands across Harry’s chest and feeling in turn how Harry grabbed his shoulders. It was all very nice and good and it unclenched the permanent knot of tension in his belly, to be substituted by a tingling sensation and a different kind of tension all together. It was nice, and slow and lazy, kissing each other unhurriedly.

So Draco failed to see why Harry suddenly had to sit back, lips swollen and wet from kissing. He looked at him with green eyes, green like sour green lemons, green like a beautiful peaceful place Draco had never visited. Harry’s eyes were always bright and in Draco’s mind they had become the sun.

(Not that he was ever going to tell him this. Probably. Almost certainly not).

Harry looked at him, blinking quickly to focus his sight. (That was another thing, Draco had put on Harry’s glasses and felt instantly dizzy, the boy was practically blind. How was he a Seeker?) But Harry looked at him with eyes the colour of sin and lips glistening with Draco’s spit and his hair mussed from when Draco had buried his hands in it and said:

“Your father had a horcrux.”

Which did terrible, terrible, things to Draco’s belly and the pleasing tingle that was growing there.

“Please, don’t bring up my father now.”

“But-”

“Kissing now, sssh.”

He kissed Harry twice more, but yeah the mood was gone.

Draco let himself fall back on the bed, an arm hanging loose and the other thrown over his face. It was not at all dramatic, Sirius was right, their theatrical reputation was completely unfounded. He sighed.

“Why.” He said. He knew, he just knew he wouldn’t be able to let go of the thought now. You can’t just go around and mention certain things to people with his level of anxiety. It was hard enough to stop the intruding nasty thoughts, he didn’t need to go get new ones.

“It’s just, I was thinking…”

“Why were you thinking about anything other than me?”

“Yes, why would I do that Malfoy.”

It was so unfair that Harry had somehow learned to deadpan in the best Snape tradition. Draco didn’t have to move his arm from his face to know Harry was smiling, though.

“But, no, really, listen. Your father had a horcrux, maybe someone else has one. We are pretty sure he is following a theme with the objects, but I don’t think he is doing the same with the locations.”

Ug, He was right. Draco could tell already. There was the ancestral house, and that weird cave with the locket.
“Do you mean, he was maybe trying to follow a theme but the couldn’t pull it off?”

“I don’t know… It’s just… maybe he left one with someone while he thought of a good place.”

So Draco had his make-out session rudely interrupted but at least the idea had some value and when they spoke to Hermione the next day she agreed.

***

They said that Dolohov had been planning something with some dark wizards of the Nordic countries and that after his death Rosier had fled there. Given that Rosier and Mulciber were still to be found it was understandable that now Voldemort wanted to keep informed on everyone’s activities and whereabouts. This meant that despite the regular updates in the Carrows’ name, Severus now had to leave Hogwarts every two or three weeks to report in person.

It wasn’t too bad. There was of course the lying to His Darkness’ face and managing his legilimentia, but Severus found little trouble with that. He was a skilled storyteller so he knew exactly what to say.

Was everything fine in Hogwarts? No, of course not.

See? That was key. He couldn’t just say yes, that was unbelievable. Instead he complained about the Carrows and how their sadism wasn’t helping much in the indoctrination of the students. Sure, the whole castle was terrified and giving him less trouble than expected, but scarred and mutilated people would do for a poor addition to Voldemort’s army.

“An iron hand in a velvet glove, my dear Severus.” Is all Voldemort told him.

Some asked after their kids. Not Lucius, of course, not him. He had been very careful not to mention his son or paternity in any way. But Nott, Goyle, Crabbe and even Parkinson and a few others occasionally asked. Severus merely glanced at them and said those who were loyal had nothing to fear. There was a threat in Severus’ words. A reminder to all deatheaters that their children were at the mercy of the most devoted and beloved servant of Voldemort. The Dark Lord smiled when he heard him; it was ridiculous how easy it was for Severus to please him.

So the trips weren’t too bad. Nerve wracking perhaps because one bad thought could set the alarms in Voldemort’s mind and he would discover everything. But all in all, not too bad. Certainly Severus wasn’t the one who had to defend himself.

It was what happened around the trips to Voldemort that was strange and unsettling. Once Severus was by the gates of Hogwarts he never apparated directly to the manor. It was a habit from past days, that he always took an indirect route or at the very least he apparated a bit away from his destination. Enough that he could walk for ten or fifteen minutes before reaching the place. He found that that time helped him settle his mind and arrange his thoughts.

He also found an inordinately high number of squibs, muggleborns and crooks (muggles who married magic) and in one particularly bizarre occasion the centaur Firenze. When the meeting was in the Ministry or nearby Severus could understand. People who had inexplicably managed to escape arrest and the holding cells and then came across Severus, fine. But he was not ashamed to admit that he was veritably perplexed when he found the aforementioned Firenze with a squib girl called Gadea sitting in his rump standing there in the path to Malfoy Manor.

And they were not of much help about how it came to be. For the most part people said that they saw their opportunity and went for it. Just plain good luck that there was a wand lying there, or they overheard that the Special Operator had a very upset stomach so they could overpower him with
mere physical strength, or would you believe it? their pursuers got stuck in a cupboard and they simply ran.

Yes, everybody ran. They ran right into Severus.

It was weird and he knew he should look into it. At first he had been sure that it was some sort of trap, except that it didn’t make much sense. If Severus were truly a deatheater there was the risk that he would murder them instantly so it would be a pretty stupid plan to test his loyalty. Besides he knew Firenze and a few of the others. Some had been his students, children who graduated years ago and now were scared adults fighting for their lives.

It was weird, but Severus knew better than to question it at the moment. He simply extended his hand and took them to Hogwarts where there was plenty of beds and a well stocked kitchen and medical attention. For the most part they went with him unquestioningly and given that Severus was a prominent deatheater it made you wonder what kind of miracles they had witnessed that they would simply take his hand without fear.

***

There are categories to wickedness. There is Evil and there is Pettiness. Of course the first causes more damage and more death, but in their defence they are often acting for an ideal, twisted and vicious as it may be. They are not evil for themselves but for a cause. There is some perverted notion of nobility in there.

Then there is the petty and the malevolent. Their acts are smaller and thus judged safer and kinder because they do not kill or harm like Evil does. But that is just due to their own limitations. The petty are cowardly and selfish. What they do, whatever bad they cause, they do not do it for an ideal but for themselves, for their wretched little black souls.

Today an evil person and a petty one had come together. When Evil rises, the small, the petty, the cruel and rancorous come to ride by the tail of their coats.

Bellatrix Lestrange thought that professor Swindells was too similar to Pettigrew to be even slightly tolerable. There was certainly no need to have two of them. Swindells was also terribly ineffective whereas Pettigrew managed to return his wand to the Dark Lord, she would give him that. Swindells, for his part, couldn’t find his own ass sitting on a chair, but he was pureblooded enough and he was an avid supporter of the cause so they kept him around. They had put him in the Winzemagot to review the appeal cases where his inefficiency could be best used.

He was a low level employee of the Ministry and Bella was Bellatrix Lestrange, and that still meant something even if lately the Lord was sparing in his affection. Normally, they wouldn’t have crossed paths but Bella had been tasked (or rather had requested the task after Rosier’s and Mulciber’s absconding) to find her dear cousin Sirius and the werewolf who accompanied him and murder both of them. It was proving a bit more difficult than expected since no one had seen them in over a year. She was now looking for whatever information the previous Ministry had gathered on them, hopefully a current list of known associates since Bella was quite sure that all of their old friends were dead.

It took Swindells twenty five minutes to find the correct reference for the file. Bellatrix gave him an open sore curse in the legs just for making her wait. But at last he had found it and in his sugary obsequiousness he insisted on accompanying her to retrieve the papers from the Archives. He was the radical opposite of the neat cold witch that assisted Bellatrix at St. Mungo. She didn’t make her wait and she was properly dressed, unlike this little man who had holes in his socks and kept talking and talking in an attempt to ingratiate himself to Bella.
But of course, he talked so much he was eventually bound to mention something important. Swindells kept the professor title because he had been one once, in Hogwarts no less. Nice place but he had nothing good to say of the faculty, particularly Dumbledore or Severus Snape.

“Horrible man, that Snape is.” Muttered Swindells not realizing he was criticizing one of Voldemort’s favorites. It was no secret that Bellatrix disliked Snape, but it was no secret because only she could afford to show her true feelings about the man. Everyone else had too much to lose. It wasn’t just that Snape would poison you for the insult, it was that Voldemort cherished him and he would order your death. But Swindells was too stupid to appreciate this and so he added: “No respect for traditions and the meaning of true British Magic.”

“Is he, now?” said Bellatrix with something like a white shock of electricity hiding behind her pupils.

“Oh, Madam, I won’t repeat the things he said out of respect for you. They are not for feminine ears. But I can assure you he was most vehement defending this insolent student of mine. A brown one, you know.”

Did this man not know the Mulciber family? The Shacklebolts? The Subadars? True, they had not all come to the call of the Dark Lord and the ones who did, the Mulcibers, had disgraced themselves even more than the Shacklebolts ever did with their open resistance. But their blood was pure, certainly purer than Swindells’ who reeked of halfblood. And they were competent, something he could not claim for himself.

But regardless of his idiocy what he said was interesting.

“Do tell more” asked Bellatrix with lips red and full like a flower in bloom.

“I really don’t think it is appropriate for a lady to-”

“Tell. Me.” Her voice did not inspire the same command as Severus’. It did not have that velvety quality. But she had a very nice mouth, Bellatrix. Her lips were a dream. She also had teeth, white and sharp and very much like a predator. Sometimes it felt as if she were speaking just with her teeth.

***

Despite her animagus form Minerva didn’t particularly like cats. This is, of course, quite fitting with cat nature. Real cats don’t like other cats either, they merely tolerate their existence.

The fact that Dolores Umbridge surrounded herself with cat imaginary was a particularly personal insult to Minerva. She had once transformed into her cat form for the sole purpose of finding Umbridge and scratching her when she attempted to pet her.

Okay, maybe more than once.

Minerva didn’t like cats. Not even the one she had, which was not hers. She was just minding the little beast until his rightful owner returned to Hogwarts to reclaim him. As far as cats were, though, Crookshanks wasn’t completely terrible. He respected Minerva an only came to her when he needed food or cuddles. Crookshanks was a properly independent young cat. Well, not so young, but independent and strong-minded and Minerva approved.

Crookshanks was also a cat with a vendetta. We don’t pay much attention to the private life of animals, but they have just as much drama as humans. How could we not mention the tragedy of poor Crookshanks losing his mistress? Or the sorrow experienced by Mrs Norris when the only student in the school she allowed to pet her disappeared without so much as a goodbye? She had sought comfort in the strange blonde girl, and she was gentle but it was not the same. She did not
have sardines with her and she once offered Mrs. Norris a radish. A radish!

These were their stories and their problems. In the case of these two cats in particular (or three, depending on Minerva’s mood), they had lost loved ones and they had made a few enemies and on a cold day with a white sky, one of those enemies returned to Hogwarts.

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Sometimes it looks like the Sorting Hat made a mistake. Sometimes you see a person and the traits of his house and wonder how could that be?

How could Percy, the Weasley who abandoned his family, be a Gryffindor at all? How could that weird Luna who believed in all sort of silly things be a Ravenclaw? How could Neville, Neville for Merlin’s sake, who came to Hogwarts shaking and unable to stand for himself be in Gryffindor?

How could Ernie McMillan, the one who sold Hermione, be in the house known for its loyalty?

They could. The Sorting Hat doesn’t make mistakes. Sometimes you don’t know everything about a person and sometimes the traits of the house don’t mean what you thought. Ernie McMillan wasn’t a traitor, no matter what Ron or anyone else said. He was loyal to his family and thus he did what was necessary to protect them.

Here is another example. Peter Pettigrew, the man who gave up his friends to the Dark Lord, the man who begged for his life to Sirius and Remus, who cried and tried to invoke Hermione’s compassion or Ron’s affection, that man was a Gryffindor.

People had often wondered at Peter’s sorting in Gryffindor, ever since his schoolyears. Always following his more flashing and talented friends, always hiding behind them and praising their actions.

The Sorting Hat doesn’t make mistakes. Peter was no coward. Peter had the courage to realize his shortcomings and accept a lower position humiliating himself in order to get an advantage. Peter had the courage to fight for his life above anything else. Peter Pettigrew had the courage to sell his soul to save his life.

You have to be very brave to damn yourself to hell.

It should be said that Peter didn’t enjoy his betrayal. And it was a betrayal for he had not been seduced like many others by the promises of gold and silk that the Dark Lord made. He did not hate James and Lily and he was very sorry for them. James had always been good to him, got him sketchbooks and colour pencils and always praised his drawings. Lily was a bit too intense and Peter was scared of her. He thought she had always suspected him the way she looked at him, but she was good to him too. They were both good, they were his friends and Peter did not want either of them to die, nor Harry.

But as it turns out Peter had the courage to live with himself after their deaths. Again and again, he always had the courage to choose himself.

However, every time he did that it seemed like the choice became harder. He chose himself and gave up his friends to the Dark Lord, and he payed with his soul, damned forever. He chose himself and he had to cut his own finger as he let his friend Sirius be arrested in his place. He chose himself and lost a hand bringing back Voldemort, the one who could protect him from Sirius’ and Remus’ anger.

Every time the price increased, every time the choice was harder.
“I don’t trust Snape.” Said Bella, a dark curl falling down her forehead and over her left eye. “He is hiding something. Go to Hogwarts and find out what it is.” She pouted, like a little girl who had just been awaken from a nap, an unholy mixture of innocence and sex. “Report only to me.”

Peter did not want to go. Peter thought that even if Hogwarts was under the power of Snape and the Carrows it was still populated by a high number of people who would see him dead.

“Go now, Pettigrew, or I will crucio you so hard that you will wish you were Frank Longbottom.”

Bellatrix made it easy. There wasn’t much room to choose, you simply did whatever she wanted. It was the certainty of facing her versus the possibility of being found in Hogwarts, so of course Peter would choose the latter and in doing that he would choose himself.

Besides, whatever she suspected of Snape it wouldn’t be so bad that if Peter found himself in danger he couldn’t reveal himself and ask for his protection. Snape was no traitor, he was like Peter. Too damned and too stained to look back. Maybe he was in talks with some foreign wizards and maybe he was working to have Bella fall, everybody knew they couldn’t stand each other, just as everybody knew that Snape was Lucius Malfoy’s little bitch. But in any case Snape wouldn’t let Peter be killed.

So Peter returned to Hogwarts. He apparated in the station in Hogsmeade and walked under the dark to the castle’s gates. He could not cross the wards that defended Hogwarts, only Snape could allow someone to pass through, but Peter was not stupid (another prejudice people often held over him. He was not as charming as his friends but he was clever). He transformed into his rat form and waited belly up for an owl to come pick him up. He waited for hours, cold and a bit damp, but at some point before sunrise and owl swooped down and caught him in its claws.

As soon as he was across the wards Peter transformed back into human dragging the owl to the ground with him. He killed the bird and felt a petty pleasure doing it.

He walked all the way to the castle’s door just for the sake of walking through the grounds in his human form. He had spent years around the castle as a rat, the castle for which he drew the map that later Sirius animated. No one knew the castle as well as him. No one. Not the other Marauders, nor the Weasleys twins nor Harry Potter himself.

Peter transformed in to Scabbers and squeezed through an air vent to the kitchen.

***

Percy woke up in the middle night which was always upsetting because he really needed his sleep. A careful examination of his alarm clock, however, revealed that it was not so much the middle of the night as insultingly early morning. He would have to get up in a little over an hour so there was probably no point in trying to go back to sleep now.

He went to the bathroom dragging his feet and with his eyes closed. Closed eyes meant protecting himself from the glare of the bathroom light and also from his reflection in the bathroom mirror. It had always been difficult to face himself in the mornings because Percy had unruly curly hair, the kind that does not make for a pretty picture early in the morning. No one else in his large family had hair like his, wild and prone to knots and tangles. It always took him a long time to get ready in the mornings but he would rather be teased for being prim and vain than for the gnome house his hair became during the night.

There was no one to tease him now, but there were other reasons to avoid the mirror.

Since he was up early he could go ahead and make a big breakfast with eggs and bacon. It was not
like the ones his mother made him (what did she do to sausages that Percy was unable to recreate?) but it was better than the mug of tea and two slices of toast he usually had. It was not until breakfast had been consumed and he had already combed his hair twice (although with eyes closed so he had only gotten rid of the knots and there was the actual styling to do) that Percy felt like he could face the mirror. He took a big breath.

“What” he said.

At first his reflection was nothing more than that, but then the mirror-Percy frowned and stepped aside and Percy was left standing there in his bathroom staring at the futures that could be.

This was the thing, Percy could see the future but he could not see all the futures. He had been surprised a few times because often the threads were hidden behind each other and Percy had to decide which one was important. But for the most part today it looked like everything would fix itself. There was… that, yes, not a problem. And that other thing, uh, look at that… and the Diggorys were going to have a fight in the evening because Cedric was way too vocal about his dislike of the new regime. Amos would like his son to show more restraint but Cedric was a stubborn one. Cedric would say that since his father was so worried about public opinion he would not burden him any more with his presence and he would just get up and leave his house. Tragic, but it did not require Percy’s intervention.

Didn’t it? There was more to that thread… Oh, yes. Some deatheaters were coming after Cedric now he had publicly disengaged from his family. That was the rule, if you abandoned a pureblood family you were a bloodtraitor and had to be punished. (Of course if you didn’t and you kept that kind of attitude then the whole family was classified as traitorous and purged). The exception being Percy of course, he was the “good” one and through him his siblings were protected.

In any case Cedric would be fine. He was still Triwizard Champion material. Percy sighed a little bit at the beautiful image Cedric would make, jumping on his broom with the sun giving him a golden halo as he waved goodbye to the stunned deatheaters. He would flee to Europe and it seemed that Victor Krum would give him sanctuary, thus proving that the whole spiel about strengthening international relations with the Triwizard Tournament had been more than propaganda.

None of this merited Percy waking up so what was-? Oh! Oh, there. There was his father getting dressed in silence and sneaking out of the house. He would be in trouble in about ten minutes. Surely a balding man would have more sense than to face four deatheaters by himself. He was supposed to be hiding, how did he even found those deatheaters to fight?

Percy barely had time to throw a hoody (another wonderful muggle invention) before apparating away. The mirror went back to being a mirror.

***

If Severus had to choose one thing, one single thing of his relationship with Remus, it would be the fact that he was allowed to touch and kiss without any other expectations. Kissing just for its own sake. Kissing to let him know that he was somewhere in his thoughts at all times.

Severus liked casual kissing. He liked it a lot.

Not to say that he was kissing Remus all the time, because he was still Headmaster of Hogwarts. He couldn’t very well be seen snogging his boyfriend on a corridor. But the rest of the time, when they walked by the forest line, and when they took the stairs to the bedroom, or when they were brushing their teeth, Severus could touch and drop gentle kisses and it made him more happy than he ever though he had a right to be.
Like now. He could give Remus a passing kiss now, not even looking if it landed on a cheek or a shoulder or somewhere in between. Just the instinct reaction to his closeness. *You are near me. I shall kiss you.* He kissed Remus even when he had other things in his mind.

“I really don’t see why Slytherins are associated with violence instead of Gryffindors.” Severus said as he stepped back, carding his fingers through his hair. It had grown longer than usual and he was too busy to think of cutting it even though it was also becoming bothersome. He had acquired a hair tie and he could now make a loose top knot to keep the hair away from his face.

(Lovegood had given him a sunflower hairclip. He was saving it for a special occasion, one in which he could make at least two Weasleys choke in their drinks).

Remus made a laughing sound bending over the sink so he wouldn’t spray the mirror with toothpaste. He spit, rinsed his mouth and turned around still smiling.

“You have a corpse-dropping place, Severus. An actual place where you would get rid of a body.”

“Which remains unused.” Truly, such a pity that neither Quirrell nor Lockhart or Umbridge came to occupy it.

Remus smiled again. He smiled a lot thorough the day. The pleasant smiles of the werewolf who tries to make himself non-threatening, meek smiles like weak tea that Severus disliked. There was also the actual wolf smile that Remus had no idea he made, the smile that put a warm tingle in everyone’s bellies; and there was the smile of the proud teacher when a student got something right (those smiles had chocolate and nuts in them). Then there was the caramel smile when a student failed and nevertheless Remus was able to show them why he failed and understand and learn. (He was such a good teacher, they were really fortunate to have him now). Remus smiled differently with Sirius and the twins, those smiles were naughty, wicked, something lively and citric in them.

Severus had his very own smile, just for him. He treasured that smile.

But as much as he liked observing and cataloguing each and every one of Remus’ smiles, what Severus truly valued was that he also got the moments of sadness and doubt and regret. He did not like those moments because he did not like Remus suffering, not at all. If it were up to him Remus would always be warm and cosy and never know another day of pain in his life. But Severus valued them nevertheless because he was the only one who got them. The only one trusted enough to see him vulnerable.

This was not one of those moments, however. There was mirth in the air.

“Right.” Remus nodded as he put his toothbrush on the cup next to Severus’. “Unused murder place, not violent at all.”

Just for that he kissed him again and he felt Remus smile under his lips. Today was going to be a good day.

***

The school was noisy and crowded and similar to how it had been for the seven years Peter had been there as a rat. You would think that having Snape and the Carrows there would make the children less rowdy.

You would think Flitwick wouldn’t walk around so chirpily. He was supposed to be in iron shackles given his half-breed nature. There should be no humming.
You would think there would be more Slytherin décor.

You would think-

That was Sirius Black.

*That was Sirius Black!*

Sirius Black was in Hogwarts. Sirius Black was standing there, holding three different conversations at once. If Sirius Black was there surely it meant Remus was there too and perhaps even Harry Potter.

Merlin and Morgana flying in a broomstick! Peter had to know more, he had to search and find out.

***

In the next few hours Peter explored the whole castle top to bottom. It was an exhausting activity for someone who was barely larger than a hand. And Peter had to be extra careful to keep out of sight of the adults.

But he saw so much! Sadly, Harry wasn’t there which would have made the Lord immensely happy, but he had found irrefutable proof that Snape was a traitor (Who would have known? Certainly Peter would never had guessed and he had pulled one hell of a betrayal). What was even better was that it wasn’t just Snape who would be punished. This was not like Dolohov being killed for his failures. Snape had filled the castle with refugees and in bringing him down they would also be taking plenty of other enemies. Sirius, Remus, that bitch McGonagall, a few Weasleys, an improbable number of muggleborns, even a centaur.

He would request to kill the Weasleys himself. It would also be great to kill Remus and Sirius but he knew he would never get them. Bellatrix hated Sirius too much. Maybe Remus, though, although he had heard that the other werewolves, the *loyal* proper werewolves, were thinking of eating him alive so perhaps Peter wouldn’t get him either. But the Weasleys, yes. He could get the Weasleys. He didn’t know with whom he would begin, though. The stupid Ronald, who jinxed him, or the horrible twins. Or maybe the girl. Yes! The little sister so the others could see her scream. Ronald would be last, and Peter would teach him how it feels to beg for your life and not get any help. He would make him beg and cry and scream and in the end he would kill each and every one of them. Although in Ron’s case he would make him wait, make him live for days knowing that his siblings were dead.

There was a scream right then. Something like a kettle letting steam if that kettle were made of murder. It was followed by a flash of orange.

Peter had been careful to keep out of sight of the humans, but he had completely forgotten about the cats.

***

The bloody cat was chasing him but Peter was clever, so much cleverer than a stupid filthy cat, cleverer than all his friends and anyone, really. Peter was the one who survived, again and again. He was clever and he knew Hogwarts better than the founders themselves.

He ran down the balustrade with the cat hot on his tail, climbed up a vertical wall and to an archway, jumped to a different level that would require taking three different flights of stairs to reach. The cat was fast and nimble but so are rats and they can fit in places where a cat can’t.

They went down a corridor at full speed, running under the robes and feet of the students walking
there. Peter heard their surprised voices as if they came from far away. He though a few of them tried
to stop the cat in case Peter were someone’s pet. Ha! Wouldn’t that be fun? Let them stop the cat and
let them help Peter get away. He would be back soon enough to show his gratitude.

Peter laughed exhilarated when he found the little drain in the east corridor of the second floor, the
one with the grill missing a corner. Barely big enough for a rat to squeeze through, but he did, he did.
He went through and put a little bit of distance before turning around to laugh at the cat who had
squeezed his paw inside and was feeling around. Peter laughed again as the cat removed his leg and
pressed his ugly flat nose to the small opening. How he pawed and scratched and meowed at the
drain, but he could do nothing! Nothing! Once more, Peter prevailed. Once more he escaped his
enemies.

Oh and so many of them. Bellatrix had said to report only to her, but not only had he found that
Snape was a traitor, but he had seen Sirius and Remus too. Sirius and Remus who beat him and
insulted him and tried to kill him that night almost four years ago. No, he would tell the Dark Lord
directly and he would be rid of all of them.

They had tried to kill him. Peter didn’t feel sorry for them. He didn’t feel sorry for anyone. At last
they would all see who deserved to be on top. Who had the courage to climb to that position.

Peter should have kept looking forward. It would had been better.

But he couldn’t help it. He just couldn’t. He kept looking over his shoulder although he knew very
well that no cat would be able to chase him down there. No one could get inside the pipes system.
He kept looking and thinking how wonderful it was that he was putting so much distance between
them. So far already! He was getting away once more and he had such wonderful news for
Voldemort, hahaha! Voldemort would give him everything he desired. And Bella, oh, perhaps she
would take him to bed or he would take her, so grateful she would have to be for having ridden her
of Snape. Maybe he would let her play for a while with the little Weasley girl before he killed her in
front of her brothers. What beautiful dreams was Peter weaving.

He was in rat form which is a form quite suited for fables. This one would be a story about keeping
your mind in the present and not thinking ahead of you when there still remain obstacles to
overcome.

Peter didn’t look forward and so he didn’t meet the eyes, those terrible, terrible eyes that killed you
the moment they locked with yours. They were terrible, but they were also a kindness. Peter didn’t
see them so he ran directly into the teeth and by then it was too late.

The Basilisk ate Peter, teeth crushing bone and poisonous spit burning the skin. It spit the little silver
paw and didn’t think much about it other than how nice it was for rats to jump directly to your
mouth.

It would be a long time before anyone discovered the fate of Peter Pettigrew. It would require
Crookshanks pointing insistently to McGonagall and she figuring out that there was something in the
sewers and a third year Ravenclaw loaning them her pet ferret (ferrets weren’t allowed in the school,
how did she get one?), a ferret that could move through the pipes and bring back a small silver paw.
Ron would cast two protegos on himself before confessing that maybe there was a Basilisk going
through the pipes of Hogwarts that Harry had refused to kill.

A long, long, time before all that happened.
Meanwhile Bellatrix waited for Peter and noticed his absence. She did not care about Pettigrew going missing but she cared about the delay in her plans.

Wars have a lot of downtime. Wars in fact are won during the downtime. The side that doesn’t lose its mind waiting, the side that refrains from doing something stupid during the lulls of time, that is the winning side. Both the brilliant and the terrible ideas come at these intervals between the fighting.

It was at a time like this that Bellatrix thought of looking for the Longbottoms. It was at a time like this that she started to plan how to manipulate things so she could get to Hogwarts and see with her own eyes whatever Snape was getting up to. It was at times like these when she lay in bed and imagined the voice of her Lord, how angry he would be but also how pleased with her. She lay in bed half naked and caressed the skin of her forearm, careful not to touch the mark, not yet. But once she was there, once she had seen and had the proof, oh, then she would touch and she would call her Lord to reveal the traitor and it would be so good.

***

Bellatrix was insane, there was no denying it. One could easily think that it had been the long decade in Azkaban that made it that way, but if anything the emotional suppression of the dementors was almost therapeutic. She had been insane before that, you have to be to follow someone with that zeal.

But she was more than an insane witch. She was the best duellist out of all of the death-eaters. The best. She was also very intelligent like all Blacks were. It was just the poor control of her emotions that prevented her from making a better use of her mind. She did not have patience for long term plans and she often got too agitated to manipulate people properly. She couldn’t help letting her rage overcome her and she ended up screaming.

Ironically, Bella envied her sister’s coolness, the detachment with which Narcissa was able to move as if absolutely nothing in this world could affect her. Sometimes she told Narcissa gruesome things about the war or talked about the son that had been repudiated just to see if she could make her snap. She knew it was cruel, but wasn’t Narcissa cruel too? Flaunting that temperament, that impeccable control, making herself the queen of ice and snow when Bellatrix couldn’t do that?

Bellatrix fucked her husband to get her mind out of things and when that wasn’t enough, because Rodolphus was little more than a shell, she went and found herself someone else. Someone pretty and full of energy that afterwards would leave her sated and relaxed and ready to think.

The stupid rat had failed and she wasn’t surprised. Most likely he had fled, scared of what he had seen and scared of Voldemort himself. That only proved what Bellatrix suspected. It was her fault, really. She should have gone herself.

She would.

***

The problem was that Bella had made it about herself and about Snape, and even though she was right her Lord wouldn’t hear another word about it. Men were obdurate. But she was not so clumsy that she could not turn it around, and so she waited for the next meeting when Snape gave his report as usual: calm, precise, somehow giving the impression of effectiveness and of not dawdling around wasting precious time that could best be employed in the Lord’s cause. She waited, digging her nails in her thigh so she could keep a neutral face, and when he was done she spoke.

What a wonderful work was Severus doing in Hogwarts! Perhaps sometime in the future, once he had time to prepare of course, she didn’t want to impose, they could drop by? Bella would so love to
see how her dear goddaughter Millicent was doing and maybe little Pansy had grown out of that phase, whatever it was that came over her.

Gaius Bullstrode opened his mouth to point that Bella was no one’s godmother and certainly not the little hogbeast of his (as if she would ever consent to having such a disappointing child near her) but he wisely shut himself instantly.

Once he had time to prepare, she had said, and once she uttered those words, there was no way that Snape wouldn’t rise to the challenge and say he required no preparation and they could visit at once. That’s the problem with perfection, you can’t suddenly delay and give excuses.

Plus Bella wasn’t completely removed of the world, she knew half of them wanted to know about their children. She understood that parents were concerned with their children.

“If our Lord believes it adequate” Snape said slowly. It didn’t pay to speak quickly, it made you look too eager to convince, too worried about someone noticing your faults. She hated the man but she recognized he was good. “I will be glad for the opportunity to show the improvement of their children.”

Improvement was an excellent word. It sounded positive but it also implied there had been room to improve in the first place, that someone had been less than perfect. And he had said “their” not “the children”, but “their”, and there had been quite a lot of shifting because suddenly no one wanted to be the father whose child had to improve.

Voldemort spoke then, a spark of pleasure in his red eyes. So nice to finally see Bella (he was calling her Bella! Not Lestrange, not Bellatrix, Bella!) and Severus being amicable. Bella smiled with that mouth of hers that looked like a poem and like a sinful dream. She felt a bit guilty, though, a bit sad, that her Lord could be manipulated so. This was the Dark Lord, this was Lord Voldemort, the Conqueror of Death, Protector of the Pure Blood. He should not be led so.

But he had called her Bella, at last, that was all she wanted to hear.

***

Severus, on the other hand, was less pleased with Voldemort’s words. Severus had a castle full of people that shouldn’t be there and the children were remarkably un-indoctrinated. The least that he needed was to have a Parent Visit Day. But that was a problem twenty minutes in the future. Severus had another more current problem to navigate like pleasing Voldemort and leaving the meeting alive. Dolohov’s death was very present in everyone’s minds, as was Rosier’s and Mulciber’s disappearance and lately Pettigrew’s.

He knew… If he fought this even a little bit he would have lost because then they would accompany him for sure, no matter what. But it wasn’t just that. Voldemort was a legilimens For Merlin and Morgana’s sake. For all that Bellatrix was pulling strings now to get to Hogwarts all she needed to do was make Voldemort want to get a good look at Severus’ mind and without remedy any of his multiple secrets would come tumbling down.

Voldemort wasn’t looking at him. His hand was resting idly over his wand, his index finger barely touching the wood.

Severus glanced at Lucius and let himself admire the figure he cut, the perfect elegance of the lines of his body. He had always been handsome and he had aged well, although he was giving a less than perfect image ever since Draco. Not only had Draco left taking with him half of Lucius’ symbolic power, but he had returned to save a mudblood no less. That had been a horrible political hit. Lucius
was making a good job of keeping impassive during this school talk, his eyes following the silent and graceful movements of his wife around the room. The wife that more and more resembled a spirit or a ghost and Severus couldn’t believe there had been a time when he envied her.

But Lucius, Lucius for all his elegance was an earthly creature. Cold, yes, and unattainable, but also sinful and oh! what sins he could bring to mind, what lovely sins. Severus let himself think of some of them and of whatever they had shared, the times when Severus would have done anything for him. And then he brought to mind those more recent feelings of thinking Lucius was a hopeless idiot that was ruining Draco.

All true, all true. And Voldemort, yes, he had touched the wand, Severus saw it through the corner of his eye. Voldemort didn’t need to say the words or even move the wand to get a glimpse of surface thoughts. Voldemort would think that Severus was angry at Lucius for allowing Draco to become the traitor he was known to be, but also Severus would seem regretful. It wasn’t difficult to manipulate thoughts like this, and it would explain his current hesitance, not wanting to so publicly put Lucius on the spot for the sake of whatever they had shared.

All this took less than ten seconds. But Severus knew and understood Voldemort well enough that conjuring suitable images and feelings had become something automatic in his presence. Others might forget Voldemort was a legilimens, even Dumbledore had done so on occasion, but never Severus.

The one time he forgot, he was forced to reveal the secret that took his best friend’s life.

“Yes, I don’t see why not” said Voldemort at last. He had a soft voice, like ashes and dry leaves sliding over a stone floor.

With this Severus once more saved his life and all the lives that depended on the secrets of his mind. Once more he deceived him and left the room still as the loyal and beloved servant. But, that was the problem of the now. The problem of twenty minutes in the future was approaching. They would come with him. There was no way he could fight Bella and the parents at the same time about the issue, not with Voldemort there looking all pleased that at last he and Bellatrix weren’t fighting openly.

Not when this was another opportunity for Voldemort to subtly punish Lucius. Lucius had been still paying for losing Voldemort’s diary when Draco went and abandoned them. His debt was now astronomical.

One look from Bellatrix and Bullstrode knew to step back and simply mutter to please send his love to Millicent who Severus knew had become good friends with Lovegood and stopped wearing the standard black robes in favour of ones she had designed and died herself. Yesterday morning Lovegood had proudly showed Severus the shirt Millicent had given her and asked for his opinion.

Bullstrode was out, but Crabbe and Goyle and Parkinson were coming. Goyle perhaps could be fooled, because Goyle was… limited. But Crabbe was more cruel and lazy than stupid and Parkinson was a perfectly average man in talent and intelligence.

And then of course Bella, heading the group and barely able to contain her satisfied smirk.

They apparated in Hogsmeade rather than at the gates. Apparition required holding a precise image in the mind and it was easier to think of the village than of the gates nobody payed attention to. It was not a short distance, close to an hour walk, and yet if felt minimal as they walked through the old path. Severus’ intestines were liquefying and then welding themselves to the iron rod that was his spine.
He could see the iron gates to Hogwarts. The gates he now had to open for them. He was the only one who could do it and he was bringing these monsters with him.

Four deatheaters, one of them the best duellist of the decade. What could Severus do? And whatever he did now, what would he do later? In an hour or come morning when their absence became conspicuous and as good as a declaration of betrayal. What then? And that was assuming he had been madly lucky and he had somehow managed to disarm the four of them.

They were at the gates, Severus was granting them access. The castle was there, barely ten more minutes of walk.
A lesser man would have probably outed himself. A lesser man would have died. Severus, though, was not the lesser man. Severus, as Hermione Granger had once accurately described, had a permanent poker face and so he didn’t raise a brow nor move a muscle when they were greeted at the entrance by a line of dejected and morose teachers and a grinning Alecto Carrow at the head.

“Severus, you are back” said Alecto showing her teeth. She looked a bit like a monkey. “You didn’t say you would bring us company.”

“It was a last minute decision” Severus answered and if his voice was colder and harder than usual, who could tell?

Severus was surprised but so was Bella. She had been so sure that the moment they set a foot in Hogwarts they would see all kind of muggleborns and students drawing signs reading “Die, Voldemort, die.” To be fair, she wasn’t that far from the truth. But here they were with the teachers dutifully forming a line to show their respect for the Headmaster. Minerva had her eyes casted down, looking at the floor. Even when the Carrows were here, well, they were here now, but even at the beginning of the course is what Severus meant, when the Carrows were seconds away from murdering her, Minerva had been glaring daggers at them. Minerva took Amycus’ wand.

But she looked down now, soft and old and defeated and Severus seriously considered the possibility that he had done something wrong at the gates and they had come to a different universe.

(He did not have the energy to defeat Voldemort in two universes, he didn’t).

Bella wanted to see the whole castle and all of Severus’ achievements. The others just wanted to see their children. Slughorn bowed and said he would bring the kids at once and they moved to wait in the little room next to the Great Hall. Professor Sprout served them drinks with a calm an empty look that in no way gave the impression that she hoped they all choked with their drinks and died.

Things were working for Severus, but he was not in control and it was terrifying. This downcast Minerva was truly the most uncanny thing he had ever seen and he routinely held Voldemort’s gaze.

“And where is your brother?” asked Bella her eyes fixed on Alecto who was adjusting her breasts inside her bra. A vulgar gesture that seemed quite natural on her.

She laughed, Alecto did, with that piggish laugh that was so grating. “Eager to see him, eh?” she leered at Bellatrix “He is just finishing with some students, don’t you worry.”

Indeed Amycus came soon after, greeted everyone, and told Severus, as if this had been a long held conversation that they kept having and interrupting, that Madam Pomfrey was truly bothersome.

“The point of a punishment is to be felt” he said. “Healing them afterwards erases the correction of their rotten character.”
“A dead student can hardly correct his ways” Severus replied hollowly.

“They are hardly going to die from some old fashioned flogging.”

It was probably the most surrealist experience in Severus’ life, and he had once seen Harry pick a flower, a real flower, out of the drawing in a book. Harry had looked at him with big eyes wide open in surprise when the flower vanished soon after from his hand, as if he couldn’t understand what had he done wrong when Severus couldn’t even begin to say how he had done it at all.

They asked about the discipline, about what the students were learning. Michael Corner, Ravenclaw prefect, was brought to the room and dutifully recited the Ministry sanctioned pamphlet on blood purity. Laura Bunsen who revered the floor where Lupin walked, explained why purebloods were better and the half-breed should serve them or die.

“It isn’t that right?” said Flitwick. “Very well put, dear, very well put.”

She made a small curtsy as she exited the room.

“You really got them tamed, eh Snape” said Goyle, blessed idiot that he was, laughing boisterously. Unfortunately this served to shake Bella awake from her stupor. Bellatrix, the sick sadist, who then asked about the Weasleys. Such a family of blood traitors, she would like to see what Severus had done with them.

“Weasels get what weasles are” Amycus said and there was something wild in his eyes. His sister laughed (“hurhurhur” or something similar) and Parkinson Father couldn’t help flinching. It really was a grating laugh. “If that insolent nurse hasn’t taken them down, they should be hanging.”

And then Amycus went to tell them that the most obdurate students were experiencing long physical punishment which involved being caged and flogged and hung from their wrists. He spared no detail and had Crabbe Sr. salivating over his description of how the girls cried and begged for mercy, how he had made the little Ginevra, the Weaselette, break at least six of her brother’s bones before letting her out of the dungeon.

This was a horrible thing to say, Severus knew. This, whatever this was, was a good charade, excellent, but they couldn’t say this. It was too good and now they would all want to see. Bellatrix in particular was breathing heavily and said she would like to see if she could make the little Longbottom more pliable. She wanted to give him her regards, oh, and news about his parents, didn’t they all think he would like to hear that?

“No.” said Alecto, who until then had been still fidgeting with her bra, suddenly cold. She pushed her shoulders back, her spine straight. “You think you can come to my territory and play with my toys? Back of, bitch.”

Alecto Carrow had looked at Bellatrix Lestrange straight in the eye and she had called her bitch.

“Why you little…” this was being a day full of surprises for Bella “Tormento!”

Alecto didn’t say a word. She barely flicked her wand and Bellatrix’s curse crashed against an invisible wall, spiralling upwards and disappearing with a hiss and a hint of smoke.

“I ought to teach you some manners!” There was so much cruelty in the lines around Alecto’s mouth. So much fury and pain.

“Ladies, please.” Severus intervened, taking Alecto’s wrist so she would not curse Bellatrix, and deftly stepping between them. Nothing good could come of that. Bellatrix wasn’t someone you
would want to duel no matter how good you were. “Let’s not argue. We are all friends here working for the same cause.” Severus spoke so very carefully, his voice a mixture of iron and glass, clean and strong. “But I am afraid I have to back Miss Carrow here, it is her students after all and she should see how she punishes them. If she has decided that they must be locked and withdrawn from all human contact, then so be it. I believe her methods have proved more than successful. Certainly better than Mister Carrow’s in the long run.”

There was some muttered agreements, although Bellatrix hissed and Alecto looked like she was seconds away from bashing her skull open with an old and seldom used ashtray. Goyle Senior, who seemed like he was having a wonderful evening, spoke then and said to not ruin the party, they all had their people to torture and Bella wouldn’t like it if they were to take her prisoners, would she?

She had been close to carving Avery Junior’s eyes out with a knife because she still blamed him for Granger’s escape. Everybody knew that, so she had to acquiesce. She couldn’t go stealing people’s prisoners after the big stink she had made.

Crabbe looked disappointed. He had gotten excited about the idea of seeing them, already thinking that he could urinate on some of the bound prisoners (he didn’t even think about them as students, or children, just anonymous bodies to harm), maybe make them crawl and beg. Lick the sole of his shoe. Lick something else.

Slughorn chose that moment to return accompanied by Crabbe and Goyle (junior) who were holding a trashing Pansy Parkinson between them. The girl was full of cuts and bruises and dishevelled.

“Father” said Gregory. “How wonderful to see you. Look at what I have learned.”

He dropped the arm he was holding and with barely any hesitation he turned around and casted the *cruciatus* on Pansy.

Her screams.

Minerva flinched a little and so did Flitwick, but other than that nobody moved her eyes from her. Alecto and Amycus walked to the back of the room where they each took a gulp from a smoking cup as if they couldn’t be less interested in the spectacle. As if it were a common thing, routine.

Pansy was still screaming and trashing, held upright by Vincent Crabbe. When Goyle lifted his wand at last she dropped, her legs too weak to keep her upright and only the strength of Crabbe keeping her standing.

The worst part, however, the worst part was when she got her breath back and said “fuck you” to everyone, “fuck you all and your ideas” and Scipio Parkinson gave a step forward and casted *crucio* on his own daughter. Not even a slap, like Malfoy; not a word, as if she weren’t human.

This time she trashed and writhed so much her robes pulled up, exposing a bit of a white tight and a flash of her underwear. Severus had to avert his eyes, his stomach rolling with nausea. Amycus and Crabbe Junior and Senior were smiling the worst smiles, something that made Severus want to hurl. Alecto’s lips however were pressed tight, in fact all of her was a tight line of tension, her lips and her shoulders and the arm with which she was holding the wand and even the line of her eyes following Pansy’s movements.

The wand…

“Such insolence” Scipio murmured. “I don’t know where she got it, what kind of influences…”

Draco, he meant. How could she still be like that when Draco wasn’t there to corrupt her.
Convenient Draco, charming Draco, who gave an excuse for the children that refused to follow their parent’s steps. It wasn’t them and it wasn’t their death eater parents, it was Draco and his pestilent influence. Certainly it was not Scipio Parkinson’s fault. His loyalty had been proved beyond a doubt.

Pansy was gasping and whining softly, her sweaty hair falling over face. Alecto laughed her piggish laugh and told Crabbe and Goyle to take the girl and tie her outside. A night on the yard would help her cool down.

For a moment, Alecto’s eyes flashed blue.

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Severus accompanied the four death eaters to the gate of Hogwarts, feeling like a spectre. He saw them cross the line and apparate away and still he couldn’t shake the feeling that his insides had been removed and he was currently filled with sawdust.

After Gregory Goyle’s performance, Vincent Crabbe had demonstrated his mastery of the cruciatus cursing a third year Hufflepuff (the one… the one who knew about Oompa Loompas actually) who cried as if he were being gutted. And then Bella seemed to remember she was supposed to care about Bulstrode and asker after her. The girl came impeccably dressed with the school uniform and her hair neatly combed and meekly confessed not to be quite adept with curses yet or anything that required physical exertion, but to be quite good at potions and cooking as was proper for a young witch of her status.

It was like seeing three, maybe three and half, Narcissas Malfoys pressed together in a single body.

Mrs. Babbling, the professor of Ancient Runes, had coughed softly and reminded Severus that bed time was coming and perhaps they would like to stay and see the night reading?

And so they had gone back to the Great Hall where all the students were standing at attention by their house’s tables (although Severus saw a couple of Hufflepuffs wearing Gryffindor regalia, perhaps to even the numbers). Following the direction of the prefects, who were conjuring lines of text in the air, they all read in unison the joyous proclamation that had been printed in The Prophet about the new age that was coming and the importance of wizard pride.

It was like something that Umbridge would had dreamt. The discipline, the obedience, the perfect order with which they exited the room, Slytherin first as it was becoming, then Ravenclaw, Gryffindor last of course, girls and boys keeping two feet of separation between them.

Goyle had slapped Bellatrix on the back amicably. “I am sure that some of them had to be imperiused” he said. “Can’t be all that good, uh?”

And she had accepted it, she had accepted it because here were most of the students dutifully reciting the official words and making vows and studying hard to come join the lines of Voldemort’s ranks. She had accepted it because as much as she despised Snape, this was something she wanted to see and believe. A world in which people loved Voldemort as much as her, yes.

Soon after they had all left.

Severus walked slowly back to the doors of the castle. The night air was cool and it felt good against his pulsing temples.

Alecto was waiting by the door, shifting from foot to foot. Her robe seemed to have shrunk recently and it exposed her ankles. Her brown hair had also acquired a reddish hue.
“Everyone gone, Headmaster? Are we good?”

Were they? Honestly Severus had no idea. He had a tension headache is what he had.

“I believe so” he said, because true, the deatheaters had come and they had left Hogwarts and even Bella had been convinced once she saw a Gryffindor walk past carrying the books of a Slytherin student. Or maybe she still suspected, but in any case they were gone. Severus had seen them leave and he had closed the gates after them. They could not come back.

“Great!” Alecto said. Her voice coming a bit more deeply. She stood in front of Severus with her right hand up, palm open.

She grinned. Her cheeks had freckles.

“Come on, don’t let a man hanging here!” she said, for a meaning of the word “she”. She shook the hand in the air a little bit.

Severus sighed heavily, but he high fived her. It had been earned.

“May I ask why you didn’t take the form of Amycus?” Not that Severus cared much, but it seemed like the logical choice.

“I’m the only one who can make the laugh well enough” said still Alecto, because that was still Alecto’s face, but definitely Ron’s voice. “Honhonhonhon” he demonstrated.

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Everybody was exhausted and a bit dizzy from the adrenaline still rushing through their systems. Severus stared at the refugees coming out of one of the secret tunnels where they had been hiding and was honestly shocked at the amount of people emerging, one by one, all pale with fear but smiling. Surely he hadn’t brought that many?

And what the hell had happened?

“As soon as we received your message, we began preparations.” Sprout told him. She was smiling too and Severus noticed she had a truly nice smile. Next to her, professor Babbling was also grinning and leaning a bit on her for support. It had been truly nerve wracking.

“What message?” asked Severus.

“Your message? With the patronus?”

Oh, dear.

“I did not send a message. I was surrounded by deatheaters at the time.”

There were five seconds of silence. Even Sirius managed to be quiet.

“You must had been surprised by our little charade then” said Slughorn at last.

“Very much.”

“Gooooood” and for the Mercy of Morgana but Minerva was a vindictive woman. Also, her voice sounded terribly deep, as if it were coming from the lowest boilers from hell. “You deserve it for what you put us through at the beginning of the semester.”
Did he, really? He had derived some small enjoyment from it, certainly, but it had been necessary. He needed to get the password from the Carrow’s minds. He had made a very humorous reference to compensate.

No, frankly, Severus didn’t think he deserved any of the stress he was suffering.

Another thing he didn’t deserve, the wonderful boyfriend he had somehow gotten, who was now dropping a comforting big hand on his shoulder, his thumb squeezing on one of the knots of tension Severus had gotten.

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The patronus had already vanished but somehow its words remained, words uttered softly like the feathers of the animal that carried the message. *Snape coming accompanied by Bellatrix, Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle. Expect Hogwarts to be perfect prison.*

For the next few seconds nobody spoke. They didn’t breathe. There was something very much like terror grasping at their temples and squeezing, taking their vision and their hearing.

Iseo Ildenglass, seventh year prefect for Hufflepuff rose from her seat silently. “Come on” she said to her male counterpart, tapping him in the arm and shaking him from his stupor.

Iseo Ildenglass had thick ugly glasses and a complex over her weight, although she was not as fat as she believed. She also had multiple friends who couldn’t return to Hogwarts this year and friends who only did because they had been rescued and she would do anything to protect them. She pointed her wand at the walls and started to take their unorthodox decorations, making space to put back the usual paraphernalia of the four houses.

Hufflepuffs tend to be humble and unassuming and they are the last people one would think about when preparing for battle. Gryffindors are the obvious choice, followed by either Ravenclaws or Slytherins because anyone coming with a smart cunning plan is welcome to participate in a fight. But Hufflepuffs have that kind of resilience that easily becomes hopefulness. When a Hufflepuff speaks and says something will be done, it is easy to imagine it being done, to see the achievement accomplished. When a Hufflepuff speaks, it is easy to take their drive and let it carry you to the goal.

They didn’t know how much time they had. Probably an hour if Snape made the sensible choice of apparating in Hogsmeade and walking from there. An hour to put everything back as it was. An hour to bring back the four houses decorations, dust the unused sand watches with the points and make sure that somehow all the Slytherin paraphernalia was shinier and in a higher position than the rest. Definitely take down the shrine to Draco and the posters calling for union against evil. *Definitely* take down the twins’ version of the Morsmordre.

It could be done. Working diligently and together, it could be done.

There was an emergency meeting between faculty, prefects and some of the adult refugees, to hatch some sort of plan together. To everyone’s bewilderment the best strategist turned out not to be a Slytherin. The next Slytherin in line, professor Slughorn, had always been more concerned with eating chocolates and accumulating connections with powerful people (sadly there had been a tragic lack on both accounts in recent years). The most he did for the crisis was pointing out that no matter how well they played their roles it would be for nothing if they couldn’t present the Carrows.

“So we choose two people, not teachers, to polyjuice like them.” Said Philip. Philip was the other resident werewolf in Hogwarts and an absolute sweetheart. He was still healing from his wounds.
because werewolves were supposed to be dark creatures and therefore those who refused the call of the Dark Lord were punished severely. Killed, was most like it.

“The potion takes a month to brew.” This was said in almost unison by Professor Slughorn and every Ravenclaw present.

“Horace” said professor Sinistra, fellow Slytherin. “Are you telling me that you don’t have some prepared already? Really?”

“I may have some in my office” he admitted. “Although I can’t vouch for the quality or the length of duration.”

“I believe Severus has some too” added Remus because he would be surprised if he didn’t.

“It’s in a glass container on the cabinet by the window.” Luna said with her dreamy voice and her dreamy eyes. “He showed me. For emergencies, he said.”

He had not. What he had done was point at the cabinet and tell her to stay well away from it because it was very dangerous, I mean it, Lovegood, if you somehow survive the gruesome accident that will befall you if you touch them, I will kill you myself for disobeying, yes you may have a piece of liquorice.

That was only a partial solution, there was much more to do. They had to choose the best candidates to impersonate the Carrows. They had to prepare a little show for their visitors’ benefit (Ravenclaws were the answer, just put them to memorize The Prophet’s propaganda), and they had decide what to do with the death eater’s children because surely they would ask after them. They had to hide all the people that shouldn’t be there and have an evacuation plan ready if things went sour.

All this was not thought and resolved by a Slytherin. Sure the Slytherins were good at spotting loopholes and they were the ones to figure out how to pretend being tortured. (The cruciatus only works if you intend it, and Gregory Goyle did not want to hurt Pansy. Her father did, but Ron’s protegos took the worst of it). But in this case it wasn’t just about finding an ingenious way out of a tight situation. It was about keeping the big picture in your mind and knowing the exact position of multiple players and predicting your enemies’ movements and counteracting them. It was about carefully manoeuvering to force your opponent down a certain path.

It was very much like chess and both Ron Weasley and Minerva McGonagall were very good at it.

The refugees were too numerous to successfully hide them in an empty room, but they could be put in a single line in one of the tunnels that Ron knew about even if he swore he never made use of them. The twins were put at the head and if things went truly bad they would be ready to start hacking down at the wards, weaker there away from Hogwarts and ignored by the Carrows. They only had to make an oberture big enough for one person to slide through. Sirius and Remus would stay on the other side protecting the entrance to the tunnel until everyone were out.

Sirius had made a big fuss about it because he wanted to play Amycus Carrow and everybody said no.

(“Honestly, all my life hearing that Blacks are too melodramatic and NOW you won’t let me be an actor. I have never ever in my life felt more insulted. This is a disgrace!”)

The twins also wanted to play the Carrows, and their argument that they already were very well attuned to each other carried certain weight. However they were more needed down the tunnel and as it turned out Ron was really good at mimicking Alecto’s laughter. There was no good reason why
Ginny should be the one to play Amycus other than she asked and it was too much effort to say no.

(Shedidn’t take “no” for an answer but she had no problem in saying “no” to others and Minerva was quite glad that she had made her prefect).

There were many things that could had gone wrong. Ginny could have failed to make up anything when they asked about Amycus’ methods. Millicent could have not gotten herself dressed in time. Pansy might have kept screaming long after Gregory Goyle lifted his wand thus proving that it was all a charade.

Many things could have gone wrong, but they didn’t. Should they blame Draco for it? For his call for interhouse work? Or was it maybe Harry? Sweet strange Harry who gave Draco that book and who always, invariably, called everyone by their first name as if he cared about them as people.

Things could have gone wrong, but Ginny was coached by Theodore Nott and Marietta Edgecombe on what to say. Millicent got an extreme make over in less than ten minutes, with over seven witches and wizards working on her. Vincent Crabbe, who had a resting troll face, practised with Pansy to squeeze her arms when Gregory lifted his wand so their little play would go seamlessly.

They made it, they made it. It didn’t look like a battle but it was and they had won.

***

“I thought it strange, somehow” Remus said as he poured Severus a glass of water and dropped a soft kiss on his temple. Severus was so tired he couldn’t even drag himself to bed. He was so tired he doubted he could sleep. His stomach had only just started to settle and he still had a tension headache. “Didn’t look like your patronus at all, even though I have never seen it. I don’t know what shape it is, but, a swan? No.”

To be frank, Severus didn’t know what shape it would be at the moment. Certainly not a swan, no, but probably not a doe either.

He didn’t dare cast it for fear of what would come. He wasn’t sure if he was afraid that it would be a wolf or that it wouldn’t be.

(Maybe it would still be a doe. Not for the friend he lost, but for the child he reluctantly called his).

“Didn’t anyone notice it wasn’t my voice?”

“Too soft” answered Remus coming to the sofa. “Scoot.”

Severus did, lazily, and Remus sat next to him, sides pressed together. Already he could feel the iron rod that was his neck beginning to relax.

“We weren’t sure, to begin with. It had to be you or Galahad.”

“Please don’t tell me anything about Galahad, I already have too many secrets tumbling on my mind.”

“Not a word.” Remus promised, laughing. Both he and Sirius had kept their vow of silence on Galahad, even though there was quite a lot of interest. At least one third of the refugees in Hogwarts knew they had arrived there thanks to him, thanks to the little notes that burned as soon as they were read and that directed them to a place where Severus could find them. The other two thirds weren’t sure but were starting to think they might had been secretly directed by him. Remus and Sirius were the only ones who had seen him face to face though so of course they were being asked about it.
Was he tall and dreamy? Did he have a long beard? Was he perhaps wearing a green raincoat?

Severus refused to learn a single detail about it because he had seen a spark of humor on Remus’
eyes that told him there was something hugely amusing about Galahad’s identity, and he vaguely
remembered Harry chattering about medieval knights, both real and fictional. So there was
something there and he really, really, really didn’t want to figure it out.

But in any case Remus was kissing him now, softly, the scratch of his beard leaving something like
little stars on Severus’ skin and at long last in this horrible and stupid day he was allowed to relax.

***

Percy’s patronus used to be a particularly ruffled representation of an owl and the twins had laughed
themselves sick when they saw it. Percy had been immensely proud of being able to cast one when
he was fourteen, and perhaps he had bragged a little bit around The Burrow but after their laughs he
stopped casting it completely out of DADA class. (And they seldom ever practiced it in that class).

However at some point in the last few years his patronus had changed. He knew because sometimes
he had to go down to the Wizengamot and there were dementors there.

It was a shark.

A classic looking shark, not one of those weird ones with the hammer head. Not too big, either.
People thought it was very fitting because Percy had a reputation now. The ruthless clerk. The one
Gryffindor, they said, brave enough to see that the new order was better.

Percy liked this new form. A shark is a perfectly nice fish with a bad reputation after all, so it felt
incredibly fitting. More than people would ever know. Plus he liked seeing it swim across the air in a
graceful dance. He liked seeing that there was some part of him that could be this beautiful, this
elegant.

Until he took up yoga Percy had never felt at ease in his body. He grew too much too fast and he
hadn’t gotten the hang of his new height. Now he felt a little more comfortable in his body which
was not a small blessing considering how often he felt like he was somewhere else.

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“I like you a lot Draco.” Harry said as if he had just made a terrible confession. Given that Draco
was very well acquainted with Harry’s mouth and that they even had had orgasms together, just from
kissing and touching, Draco felt safe saying he had gotten an inkling.

“But?” he asked, because obviously the problem here was that Harry wanted to say something more.
Not to put pressure on him now, if Harry “I died and didn’t mention it to anyone” Potter wants to tell
you something you damn well help him confess.

“It’s just, um, it’s just that… I mean, I know anything could happen. This is not the time to go
slowly. Because if you do, if you go slow, I mean, you may lose your chance and.” Harry closed his
mouth and gave Draco a pained look at his inability to express himself. But Draco knew, somehow
he could see past the rambling words to the big mountain of worry that had taken residence in
Harry’s face.

“Harry” Draco said. “I don’t know what gibberish you are uttering but just so we are clear I am not
going to die any time soon and neither are you.”

“Yeah, but… that’s just a wish.”
For Merlin’s sake, why did Harry had to be the rational one? You would think he would be more idealistic, but no. He had left all the optimism to Draco which frankly was a dreadful thing to do, making Draco be the one with the sweet dreams and plans for the future when he had no idea where to start.

But he could try. For Harry, he could try being stupidly optimistic.

“No, it’s not” he said, taking Harry’s face in his hands. “For this moment, it is not. Right here, right now, we are eternal and there is nothing else. Nothing but us.” He looked straight in Harry’s eyes, eyes that were trembling like a pair of leaves in a summer breeze. “Just us. So spit it out, Potter.”

Harry smiled at that. It was so good when Draco made him smile.

Apparently the thing that had Harry so tongue-tied and anxious was… shyness. Not even that. Just a sense that they should dive together and rush to do everything because tomorrow any of them could die and they would regret not having done more. But at the same time Harry didn’t feel like he could go past kissing yet. Kissing and groping. So he both wanted and not wanted to have sex with Draco, he thought that Draco might want to have sex and to top it all he was incapable of saying the word “sex”, so it made deciphering his words even more taxing. Honestly it was worse than when Vincent Crabbe tried to ask him if all those rumours about male veelas were true.

( Draco wasn’t sure but either Theo or Blaise had been encouraging them).

“Okay.” Draco said. May granting all of Harry’s wishes be this easy.

“Okay?”

“We can take things slow. I am not particularly in a rush, either. We will do what we want when we want.”

“But-”

“Look I would rather you kiss me because you want to, than shag me because you feel you have to. What kind of rubbish memory would that be in any case? That is not how I want you to remember me by.”

“Yes, but-” Harry narrowed his eyes and let a strong exhale through his nose. He had just caught the implication of Draco’s words and he had not liked it. Apparently Draco was not allowed to suggest that he would die first, only Harry could do that, the arsehole.

“No buts.” Draco interrupted, as usual. “Why are you even arguing this? It’s what you want and now it is also what I want. So.” Draco nodded his head and crossed his arms to show how finished he was with the topic. “Don’t argue with me” he added, lifting a finger when he saw that Harry was about to start again. “Or I will have Granger come explain to you why my logic is better.”

“No, please, don’t” Harry said hurriedly and then smiled helplessly to himself at the notion. His eyes searched for Draco’s and his smile widened. He was looking incredibly relieved, the idiot.

Oh but how much Draco liked him! No one had prepared him for this. Not Severus Snape and his yearly talks on respectful behaviour, not Sirius and his more earthy advice. What was he supposed to do now?

Harry blinked and Draco regained his senses. He barely had to clear his throat to sound like the sensible and mature person that he was. “That’s what I thought.”
With that, Draco leaned in and kissed him lightly on the corner of the mouth. “Here” he whispered as he carefully grabbed Harry’s glasses. Harry turned his head and Draco removed the glasses completely, leaving them in the bedside table. They kissed relishing their youth and their innocence and the beauty of the connection without any other demands. They kissed as if it were something new and wonderful, something unsullied and unknown to everyone else. They kissed as if they had invented kissing.

“You are kind of relieved too, aren’t you” Harry would ask later, lips swollen and eyes half-lidded. Draco said nothing and Harry laughed. So maybe Draco wasn’t feeling ready either, mostly because although his brain could supply lots of interesting images (and those French books only added more fire) he wasn’t sure how exactly you did most of the stuff. How did one ride his partner into the morning? Or give him a climax so potent they saw stars and felt unravelled, tearing the sheets and accidentally opening the mythical portal from which the seven demons escaped?

And that was only on chapter three, later on there was a very improbable three hours long shagging and that description was enough to make Draco almost come in his pants. Just kissing Harry and breathing on his smell (Harry smelled like a forest) was enough to get him almost there and if Harry moved his thigh and rubbed against him, then there Draco went. He would be embarrassed about lasting less than five minutes if he could not make Harry come just as fast by touching him over the clothes (although usually they did take their clothes off).

But in any case, yes, Draco could admit to himself, in silence, in the dark, with all doors closed and Harry and Hermione in a different floor, that maybe he didn’t know enough about sex and he was scared of trying anything else.

And that was all right.

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“We are still missing one” Draco said frowning. He had a spectacular frown, it was hilarious. He and Hermione didn’t take it well when they couldn’t understand something immediately. Harry on the other hand understood very little and was okay with it because he suspected that what most people understood was wrong anyway.

“One in Hogwarts, one with another deatheater” Harry said, counting with his fingers. It felt like he had done this same gesture a hundredth times already. “One that we have no idea if it exists at all.”

“Logic would say Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor” Hermione was sitting cross legged, dressed but with her hair in a state. It was one of those easy days when they woke up, had breakfast and migrated to the library and at around eleven someone realized they had washed and put on a nice top but were still wearing pyjama bottoms, or were missing a sock or didn’t put the toothbrush away and had been using it as pointer all this time. Nice lazy days that made it look as if planning the fight against an absolutist monster was something normal and easy. Days in which Hermione’s scar was less angry, less pink. She turned her head a bit. “I don’t think he used a Gryffindor relic.”

“On the other hand, it would be a way of appropriating something valued by the enemy and desecrating its symbolic worth.”

“Yeah, I don’t think Voldemort gave it that much thought, Draco.” Harry propped his chin on Draco’s shoulder. Draco had had the indecency of growing a lot during the last year, but finally Harry had gotten his own growth spur and caught up with him.

“What about the deatheater idea?” Hermione said while she looked at the tea mug by her side. She
didn’t remember getting it but it was still a bit hot. “Who else would he trust with a horcrux?”

“Someone very loyal, like crazy loyal.” Harry pushed a bit of his hair away, only for it to fall back to his face immediately. “Someone with a big house, I think. You know, with a state and all that entails so they would have plenty of space to hide it.”

“Probably one of the Sacred Twenty-eight, then” Draco said. “Although the key here is whether he preferred- what was that?”

“Kind of sounded like a boiler breaking” said Hermione putting the mysterious mug back on the table. There had been a big hollow sound, something that was more echo than anything else.

“Please, please, please, let’s still have warm water” prayed Harry who had his priorities very clear.

The sound was heard again and this time the whole house shook. This was not a thing the house usually did.

“What?”

“I don’t…”

“Oh, Kreacher. Kreacher is here! Kreacher is something broken?”

“Yes, master, the wards master. Kreacher is holding them, but they are pushing!” The elf hadn’t sounded so distraught in weeks, maybe months. What day was today? Never mind, the house shook again and the glasses rattled.

They went to the lobby where the portrait of Walburga was already screaming although muffled by all the blankets on top of it. Hermione arrived first and she stood on tiptoe to look through some of the empty spaces in the lace curtains.

“Oh, god, oh sh-, oh, there are deatheaters out there!” she called.

Half a dozen deatheaters, yes, standing at the door of their house.

“What?”

“Ffffu- oh, this isn’t good.”

No, it was not.

Six wizards, six dark wizards, not even bothering with the masks they used to wear. They looked so tall and strong even though in reality they were not that taller than them. But enemies always look bigger and they had their wands pointed at the door.

One of them saw them looking through the window and casted something red and sharp that made the glass fill with cracks although it didn’t break.

They jumped back.

“The papers” said Draco, because honestly, Draco was excellent on a crisis. He was horrible day to day because he would stop you on the stairs and he would give you a twenty minutes lecture over how you were a despicable human being that didn’t rinse his or her toothbrush properly and so allowed for the formation of white rings on the bottom of the cup. White rings of soap scum being a portal to hell apparently. He had claimed his own glass and his own fork and his own armchair and three pillows and fought like a diva whenever anyone tried to use them or, even worse, handed him
the wrong one.

But in a crisis Draco could keep his head ice cold.

“We have to take or destroy all the research we have on horcruxi, don’t let them find that we know.”

“No, I think what we need to do is make sure they don’t get inside the house!” called Harry.

The house shook again, the wood of the door splintered and grew some thin cracks almost as if it were sick.

“You take the papers” said Hermione, she was breathing fast and she looked scared. She didn’t looked scared when they fought other deatheaters in their research escapades, but then again this time they were coming to their house and they had taken them by surprise. Harry squeezed her shoulder and didn’t retire his hand right away. He let her notice his presence and let it ground her.

“And get your bandolier, Draco.” She added. It made sense, both Harry and her had their wands in their hands already, they should stay at the door. “Maybe think of an escape route. Protego maxima.”

The door stopped growing cracks, but the wood was now dark and fragile like the one from a shipwreck. Harry put his hand on it and took it away quickly. It felt gross, wet and mouldy. He planted his feet firmly and bended his knees slightly to make himself more stable. He knew he could do something about it, breath slowly once, twice, and start imagining a stone wall, maybe, or a very, very, long corridor squeezed in the space of the threshold so that it would take them days to cross it. On the background he could hear Draco moving, murmuring something. There were the loud screams of the wizards outside casting curses, although he could also hear what seemed like female voices so he didn’t know why he kept thinking of wizards and in any case he should concentrate! To his left Hermione was casting and casting one protective spell after another, and even though she was standing right there her voice came softer than the ones outside.

Calmer too, now. Less passion, less emotion. She casted with the firmness of a professional, as if this were another job or a practical exercise. As if she were doing it for a grade rather than to save their lives.

His hand was still on her right shoulder. She didn’t shake it away and Harry really didn’t want to lose the connection.

He could feel himself sweating cold.

He wasn’t sure what happened next. Maybe there was a moment of stillness, a moment when the deatheaters outside lowered their wands in respect and grew silent. Maybe there was a loud pop, or a woosh, and for a second a shadow covered the windows outside.

What there was, and this Harry knew very well, was a sudden explosion that pushed through the magical barriers, completely disintegrated the door and sent Hermione and him flying to the end of the corridor.

The fall hurt, his left elbow was hurting like crazy, and there were wooden splinters sticking out of his skin. Walburga was screaming high enough to hear her despite the blankets and there was a tall, tall figure standing on the threshold that Harry barely had had time to protect. The backlight obscured his face, but Harry knew that silhouette well. The bald head and the shoulders, strong shoulders but with a sharp quality as if the man were made of blades, and the height of course, how could Harry forget that looming height?
Harry had still been pretty short when he was fourteen, a month and a half shy of fifteen.

He had been even smaller when he was one year old.

Voldemort stood in the entrance of his house. Not his home, this wasn’t home, but a safe place that they had claimed and that was theirs. He was here, crossing the door, coming in.

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Given what they knew of Voldemort, the man who made his followers wear matching robes, masks, and tattoos, they were all expecting a bit more after such a dramatic entrance. Not that this was the time to discuss their disappointment, but still it felt like they had been robbed of a “Harry Potter, we meet at last” or a “Your time is up” or even “It’s time to finish what I started”. Although, truly, he seemed to be more the kind to say “time to severe our binding, Harry Potter, only I will prevail.”

But he didn’t say any of that. They couldn’t know of course, they hadn’t even thought about it because they were more concerned with Harry, but Voldemort had been scared, truly scared, when Harry got up that night in the graveyard. Because here was a kid, a useless wizard by all accounts, that nevertheless had managed to master that which Voldemort desired most.

So he would lose no time exchanging pleasantries or threats. He came, he saw, he rose his wand and pointed it straight at Harry’s chest.

And for once in his life Harry lifted his wand too, because Hermione was on the ground beside him and Draco was on the library next door. So Harry wasn’t about to waste any time scrambling to his feet or putting his glasses back. It was a big figure standing in a narrow corridor, there was no way he could miss and he could cast from the floor.

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“Avada Kedavra.”

“Expelliarmus!”

Sometimes Draco wanted to smother Harry, but he supposed he wouldn’t be Harry if he didn’t avoid killing or seriously hurting even the most truly abhorrent beings in existence. Not that turning people into trees and leaving them there wasn’t badass and terrible, but there was also something very non violent about it. Like they could transform back after a while or at the very least serve as a home for woodland creatures.

At least it wasn’t Wingardium leviosa so Draco couldn’t complain.

***

Now that he was standing and Hermione had shoved his glasses back on his face, Harry could see a bit more of Voldemort and his utterly crushed expression: A mix of defeat, rage and high quality surprise. Maybe a bit of fear too.

He didn’t know why he was acting so surprised, this seemed pretty normal to Harry. They had fired exactly at the same time so now the spells were locked, green versus red, and funny thing they had each other’s eyes colours on the spells.

Maybe he should tell him. Harry thought it was a truly fun coincidence.

But the locking of the spells thing? Oh, Harry knew about that, it was like the mock force-duels he
played with Olivia. Like every kind of sword or magic duel ever portrayed in television. Both
contenders locked and it was only the strength of the hero that would manage to get him the upper
hand.

Harry was already more than half way done. Voldemort had been too surprised to fight him back.

And the best thing, the very best thing in this horrible disaster, was that the entrance corridor was
narrow and Voldemort had barely stepped out of the door before casting so now his followers
couldn’t get in; not when they had to squeeze behind their beloved and feared Dark Lord and when
Hermione was already upright and firing back.

The snake, though, the huge snake that slid between Voldemort’s feet and slithered towards them,
that was a problem.

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Draco stuck out his head from the library, saw Harry and Voldemort with their wands locked and
Hermione fighting a huge snake and the few deatheaters who dared show their faces from behind
Voldemort’s back. Draco’s face said something like “how is this my life?”

Truly, Hermione could understand the feeling.

But at least he promptly took his hands to the bandolier to help Hermione fight the snake, which she
appreciated because that snake was like something out of a movie. No matter what she did the snake
kept jumping back to her and what kind of animal wasn’t afraid of fire? Its mouth had a pair of fangs,
long and sharp, and Hermione remembered how sick Mr. Weasley had been, how the poison kept
opening the wound back.

“Room is clean” murmured Draco, who had set fire to most papers. She could smell the smoke.

“We should go” Hermione whispered back as she made a whip like movement with her wrist and
sent the damned snake blasting back. They really should go. Even if they managed to push
Voldemort back, (and she still couldn’t believe her own two eyes and the locked spells) their location
had been revealed. In the best of cases they would be trapped in there under siege, and that was
assuming they could erect all the wards back.

No, they had to move. She wished she could sneak upstairs, just for a minute, to get their things. But
she had her wand in her hand and so did Harry and Draco, so to speak, and they had taken down the
incriminating information. So now it was down to figuring out how to get away from there.

“I can’t fly” she said, just in case, because she really, really, really, didn’t trust herself in a broom.

“No time” Draco shot back. He did some twisty motion and something beautiful and onyx black
came spiralling out of his hands and glided down the corridor to land on the face of the intrepid witch
that was peering out to the right of Voldemort.

Harry’s stream of light was more than three quarters done. Funny thing, Hermione noticed, and she
thought that no one had ever mentioned this in the very few descriptions she had read of the
phenomenon, but anyway she noticed that the stream on Voldemort’s side hadn’t been shortened,
extactly. The killing curse was coiling like a spring or like that bloody snake that still, even now, was
trying to bite them.

She had seen those muggles in Little Whinging (and she hated using that word, they weren’t
muggles, they were a bunch of boys) hit a curse and send it back. She now wondered if the avada
ekedrava would shoot back with extra force after being pressed like that.
But in any case, Harry’s red stream was almost touching the end of Voldemort’s wand (so white and long, like the bone of an abyssal fish). Draco was saying something about getting their escape route ready, could she manage alone for a minute? And…

The red touched the white wand.

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Harry wasn’t sure what would happen when either of the spells reached the other end. He had been hoping for an explosion. Explosions seemed fitting and it would be really convenient if Voldemort were to lose his wand and hand, maybe, in a small blast. But no, the stream of light changed slowly from red to a gold so pale it was almost white. Voldemort’s wand let out some ripples of golden dust that contained the echoes of something bigger, and after that came soft whispers followed by screams. They were not loud screams, it was more as if they were coming from very far away, but still clearly identifiable as screams of terror and pain. Then there was more whispers and then the first golden figure dropped from the wand.

Not an explosion, no. Harry certainly hadn’t been expecting that.

“I am dead” the figure said sadly. A man with frizzy hair. Voldemort’s wand was doing more things but certainly nothing as impressive as dropping an actual golden ghost in their foyer.

“Oh! oh dear” murmured a woman, middle aged, looked a bit familiar, as soon as she came from the wand. Many screams followed after her appearance.

“Prior incantato” whispered Hermione. “The echoes of the previous spells a wand has casted.”

That was an explanation but it wasn’t useful in the least because Harry had no idea of what to do other than hold fast. It occurred to him that as long as he kept the connection Voldemort couldn’t use his wand for anything else and that was a very good thing.

Voldemort, for his part, did not look very happy to see the ghosts of his victims. The first two were a bit confused, granted, and there was this man who dropped to his knees as soon as he came from the wand and wailed and wailed. He was thin and had very long hair and a funny scar, like a half-moon, under his left eye. They could hear him sobbing and begging for his life.

But other than the sobbing man, for the most part and there really was a truly awful amount of people emerging from the wand, the ghosts had quite a lot to say to Voldemort and it wasn’t very nice. They were dead, you see, they were dead and they didn’t have anything to be afraid for anymore. But they had quite a lot of to be angry.

“And where do you think you are going ssscum!?”

The ghost, a woman with a big perky bottom and big fatty arms turned to a redhead deatheater (Harry’s heart skipped a beat at the sight of the hair) that was slowly trying to make his way inside the house. The woman extended her arm, hand open, and oh how Harry wished Olivia and Dean Thomas could see this, because it was just like a jedi using the force and the deatheater was pushed back to the front garden.

There were more screams and more whispers and more indignation and Harry could sort of hear Hermione and Draco moving around him but he really couldn’t spare them any attention. He had to trust that they knew what they were doing, just as he trusted that they would deal with the snake. Awful snake, it could still move towards them even though the ghosts had been able to stop everyone else from giving a single step. And the snake was mean. Not like any other snake Harry
had had the pleasure to meet. Her single-mindedness was remarkable.

But Harry certainly couldn’t stop and chat with her and see what was the matter that made her so angry. All he could do was focus to keep pushing the light stream out, away from him and towards Voldemort. It was hard and he was sweating and his right arm, from his hand to his shoulder and even part of his back, was tight with tension and aching. But it was also becoming a bit easier the longer he did this, he still had to use a lot of energy but he felt that now he could look around a little bit, see the ghosts (well over two dozens now, how dreadful that was) standing there making a barrier. He could spare a few seconds to think that the spectre of a white hand he saw coming from Voldemort’s wand was maybe the spell to give Pettigrew his silver hand and that meant-

The wand would not had seen much use for those thirteen years, right? So the next echoes…

Even though she had her back to him, even though Harry had last seen her when he was fifteen months old (or when he was fourteen in a death dream), he knew instantly that that was his mother. Lily Evans was coming from the wand.

It was probably wishful thinking, that Harry thought that she shone brighter than any other spirit.

Lily had the strong back of a swimmer and she didn’t turn around to look at her son. Her feet, ghost feet, barely touched the floor before she extender her arm, her hand coming to Voldemort’s face.

He screamed. It couldn’t be pain because this was ghosts. Less than ghosts, actually, even if they were golden. They were just the soft echoes of a curse. It couldn’t be pain so it must had been fear. Even the snake stopped in its tracks and, if that were possible at all, flattened against the floor.

The next ghost was Harry’s father and wow, yes, that was definitely Harry’s face. He got it now.

It was so strange seeing him and seeing his mother too. Those two persons he loved even though he hadn’t really met them. It was so strange to see that man who was his father but not his dad.

Harry looked at him and the light thread of the spell wavered. He wanted to talk to them, to ask, although he didn’t know what to say.

“Harry! Harry, listen to me.” James had come to him the moment he was out, almost as if they had a previous agreement Lily and him. “You have to stay with the living.”

“Yes, I…”

“You can’t live with the dead.” Said James Potter, his father, stressing every syllable. “Forget about us. Focus on living and being happy, all right? You have to be happy. Tell Remus and that git ‘well done’ for me.”

Harry swallowed. His throat was dry and he felt as if there were needles stuck there and in the corner of his eyes.

“And, and, and if you want to open an ice-cream parlour, that’s fine.” He said, which was a bit of an odd thing to say to the son you didn’t get to raise. His eyes were focused on Harry as he spoke, dark and firm. He had very dark eyes, James Potter. Then he suddenly moved those eyes to the left. “Is that a Malfoy?”

Not only Harry looked very much like his father, but he was also very much like James in certain regards. The petting animals thing, for example, or that tendency to jump three or four steps when explaining ideas. This was a good thing because there wasn’t much time and James or, well, his ghost, his spirit, the echo of him, looked around and made a leap of thought and he understood.
There wasn’t much time but he would get to say his piece.

“Anyway.” His voice was slightly lighter now, less weighted with emotion. “Ice-cream. You can do that if you want. You don’t have to be an Auror or a Quidditch player or Minister of Magic, understand? And the Malfoy, yes. You have to teach him how to cast a *patronus*, Harry. These kids from pureblood families, they don’t know how. Teach him that. Take care of each other.”

Harry couldn’t know this, but Sirius had mused once, after he saw Harry and Draco bumping on each other and smiling while playing football with the gnomes. Sirius had seen them and had thought that if James had been there he would have found it all hilarious. James Potter, if confronted with his son bringing home Draco L. Malfoy, be it as an adopted brother or as something else, would have laughed and laughed and probably send a howler to Lucius laughing some more. No words, just his laughter.

Harry didn’t know this but he knew what his father meant. James had looked at him and he had *seen*. In a second he had understood more than anyone else in the room. And Harry, he understood too what he meant about the ice-cream.

His hand was shaking, he didn’t think he could hold this much longer.

“We love you very much, both of us.”

The next breath that Harry took felt as if he had buried his face in a bag full of needles and pins. His eyes and his mouth and his throat prickled with held tears.

“There isn’t much time, Harry.” James licked his lips. “Give a hug to Sirius for me, will you? A tight one so he understands.”

Harry nodded. He couldn’t speak, not right now.

“Girl, your hair is excellent.” James pointed at Hermione before stepping back to the entrance. The place was full of ghosts now, more people had come after his parents but really, how could Harry notice?

“I say, we can hold him for a few minutes, don’t you all think?” said an old man with no teeth holding a cane as if he very well were about to clock someone on the head with it.

“Ready?”

Someone was taking his left hand, a cold hand, small, soft. That was Hermione then, and the hands on his shoulders must be Draco’s and the three of them were nodding to James.

Lily was still at the head, putting the fear of herself in Voldemort.

“Now!”

Harry lowered his wand. His mother turned around and he saw her, just like in that half remembered dream that wasn’t a dream at all, that time with the smell of apricots. She mouthed the words *I love you.*

And then he could see her no more. The ghost were all falling in between, making a barrier, and Draco and Hermione were pushing him which was probably a very good idea because Harry felt rooted to the spot and his feet were too heavy. They came to the library. The walls were shaking or maybe Harry was shaking so much that he thought the walls were doing it and there was a very high pitched screech, like glass breaking, and maybe that was Voldemort or the ghosts pushing against
him or Walburga Black or all of them together.

Draco dropped to his knees and took Kreacher by the shoulders. There was dried blood on the elf’s nose and his ears and his lips were almost purple contrasting starkly with his pale skin.

“Kreacher, listen to me, these are my orders. You have to save yourself. You can’t let anyone harm you, all right? Go to Hogwarts. There is another elf there, Dobby, he can help you.”

“Tell him I sent you” Harry said. The house was definitely shaking and he may have missed something important but he agreed with the current assumption that the house wouldn’t hold upright much longer and it was better to send Kreacher somewhere safe.

There was a green fire and funny thing but that was not something that Harry liked. Green light and green fire and maybe he was mixing Maleficent with Voldemort but they were both super scary and he just didn’t like that shade of green at all.

Hermione tried to push him in, but Harry didn’t move.

“No, no. You first.” This was not cowardice though. He may not like that horrible tone of green but he wasn’t completely out of it, he knew it was the fireplace and it was floo powder which is precisely why he was sending Hermione first. And Draco next. He would go last.

Draco threw another handful of powder and pushed Hermione unceremoniously. “Ladies first, Granger. Muggleborn ladies first.”

And since she was already there she didn’t argue, she simply said the words “Leaky Cauldron” in the same tome one said there will be consequences and she disappeared.

Harry turned to give Draco a half smile of thanks but the bastard, the utter bastard, oh the prat, Slytherin he had to be, that complete and utter arsehead, went and pushed Harry next.

“Leaky Cauldron” Harry said, although the intonation meant something along the lines of The moment we step out and run out of the place and get to a safe distance I am going to- I don’t know what I will do but it will unpleasant, you git. How dare you.

***

Draco was the only one related by blood to the house, it was only proper that he would be the last one to abandon it and it was not a moment too soon. The ghosts vanished soon after and whatever happened next, whether it was the pent up energy on Voldemort’s wand or the rage at their escape or the fear he was still experiencing, it didn’t matter. The ground floor blew up. Walls, doors, windows, everything exploded and they shouldn’t have worried about hiding their research after all because everything shattered into little more than dust, the largest pieces of debris were no bigger than a child’s hand.

And since the upper floors were using the ground floor for support, the whole house toppled down. The attic with its portraits of sleeping people and chest full of cursed relics, the polished dark wood floors that gave Hermione flashbacks, the cursed bathrooms and the bedrooms in which both Regulus and Sirius Black had been so unhappy, all came down, crashing and shattering.

In the end all that remained from the ancestral seating of the House of Black was a pile of rubble and a cloud of dust over it.
Kreacher apparated in Hogwarts. Warded or not, this is something that house-elves can do. Although what most people don’t know is that just because it is possible it doesn’t mean that it is easy or painless. Much of the special house-elf magic, the great warding of a house and the apparating in protected places, involves a considerable degree of pain. This is not common knowledge but the bitter truth is that even if it were very few people would care.

Maybe a few more in later years, even since Hermione and the riots.

(The excuse that house-elves would pick it up didn’t work anymore in Hogwarts. You don’t leave your clothes scattered around, Justin.)

Kreacher had been weakened by his efforts to hold the house closed, even if the Master and the master and the other one had been helping, he had been weakened. Crossing the wards to Hogwarts had taken what little energy remained in his thin old body.

But he was there, and completing a task set by a master always gave that little rush of pleasure and power to a house-elf, enough that Kreacher could keep on his feet.

The house in which Kreacher served was exploding. He wasn’t free, he hadn’t been freed (nor that he wanted it) but he was missing a house nevertheless and he could feel it in his teeth and in his bones. A house-elf without a house was like a being with no heart or no blood. It couldn’t be. It was agony.

Kreacher could only give a step before falling down.

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“We are gonna need Longbottom. This elf is in a state.”

Kreacher had been found soon enough and taken to the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey had given him a boost of energy and even got him to wake up, but she could do nothing to stop the sobs that had captured the elf as soon as he opened his eyes.

Dobby and Winky were at the foot of the bed, standing on tiptoe and looking at him sadly with big wet eyes. They had been called to see if they could do something to calm him, or throw any light as to his ailment, but nothing that they did manage to comfort the bawling elf. Madam Pomfrey realized that as much as she knew of injuries and illnesses, be they magical or not (and Potter and his gang first and the Weasley twins later had certainly tested her knowledge), she had only the most rudimentary idea of how to treat a house-elf.

Granger’s Platform had seemed a bit silly and a bit unnecessary at first. Now it seemed too little and too tame.
“Did something happen on the kitchens?” wondered one of the Ravenclaw girls that had found him. Kreacher had indeed been aiming for the kitchens. It wasn’t proper for a house-elf to apparate anywhere else when coming to a house. But he had been so weak and panicked that he had only gotten to the dungeons which was quite fortunate. There was a constant traffic of Ravenclaw girls coming and going from the Slytherin common room because they were all ridiculously in love with the underwater window. They had gotten to Kreacher almost immediately.

Winky shook her head. “No, miss. Everything is fine in the kitchen.”

“He is not from Hogwarts in any case.” Pointed Dobby while anxiously squeezing one of his ears. Kreacher’s sobs were nerve wracking.

There was a sudden opening of various pairs of eyes. Oh Merlin, oh no, they had just put back everything. If this was someone else sending a message of another surprise visit… Please no. Gregory Goyle had been really upset about pretending to torture Parkinson even if it was just make believe. Please not again.

“Call the Headmaster” said Madam Pomfrey sternly before softening her voice to talk to Kreacher. “Mr. Elf? Can you tell us your name please?”

Kreacher was crying too hard to say a word. He had buried his face between his hands and rolled into a ball that shook with the force of his sobs.

“The portraits say that Longbottom went to the greenhouses around an hour ago” said Theodore Nott as he entered the infirmary. “But Black may be near, not sure how good he would be with an elf though.”

Longbottom was the default choice when someone was upset. Sirius’ style was different and didn’t seem suited for someone crying so hard, but if he was closer they may as well call him. Nothing they tried seemed to be working. And since they were on it maybe they should call Headmaster Snape… and they didn’t want to panic but maybe Lupin and McGonagall too because this elf seemed very, very, upset and he was not from Hogwarts and they were all wondering what could make a house-elf cry so much and make him come here to cry.

Sirius came sauntering into the room with his usual dashing smile and that spark in the eyes that made everyone stand a little bit straighter. You couldn’t slouch on the presence of such a good looking man. He seemed surprised when he saw there was an elf on the bed but his steps didn’t falter as he came closer.

His eyes opened wide.

“Oh my- Merlin! Mer-lin!! Me-eer-lin!!!” he exclaimed, which as it happens, is not what one wants to hear in a health ward. Sirius’ eyes were shining very blue. “Is that- Kreacher is that you?”

The elf was a total wreck, but he still managed to lower his hands from his face to look at Sirius.

“master!”

The students fidgeted. There is no way to reproduce how utterly broken the elf sounded.

“What- How-. Kreacher what are you doing here?” Sirius flailed a bit with his arms before moving forward and sitting on the bed. The elf was very small, there was plenty of bed for someone else to sit. Sirius’ hands hovered for a second over Kreacher’s back before he dared pat him gently.

“The Master and the master came to the house” said Kreacher through the tears that were still
choking him. “And they helped Kreacher complete Master’s orders. But now the lord has come and they had to go and the house is broken, master, it is broken.”

“So, is he having a stroke or am I? Cause that didn’t make sense.”

“No, no, no. It’s all in the inflexion.” Sirius said quickly. He put his arm over Kreacher almost as if he feared he would be taken away because of his mad ramblings.

“So” Sirius went on. It had been years since he last saw the house-elf and he wasn’t still over the shock. He hadn’t really thought about Kreacher or the house, he actively tried not to ever think about that terrible house. “Someone came to the house and helped you complete a task Regulus had given you. Is that right?”

The elf nodded. He was, incongruously, wearing a flower patterned old-fashioned jacket complete with tails and pockets. Kreacher had been assured it was not clothes, not when he knew perfectly well it came from an old tablecloth, so he was free to wear it without worries and everyone else felt better at seeing him more decently dressed. Someone offered him a handkerchief to blow his nose.

“But now they are gone and you are in Hogwarts, because…”

“Master told Kreacher to come, master.”

“Okay…” People perhaps would be surprised to learn that Sirius was a very patient man. Explosive and intense, certainly, and so full of emotions that they went over the brim. But there was a certain persistence about him that made him quite patient if not restrained. He could be patient now as he helped Kreacher up from his nervous meltdown and figured out the mystery that was his presence here. “Do these new masters have a name?”

Kreacher blew his nose on the handkerchief and a soft voice murmured that he should keep it, really, I have more. He took a big breath and he looked at Sirius with his dirty green eyes.

And he told him.

***

They were holding an emergency meeting in the corridor outside the infirmary. The meeting had started inside the infirmary until Madam Pomfrey pushed them out because the chatter disrupted her patients.

Her current patients were the Carrows, who were still sleeping in a dusty corner of the room, and Kreacher who had calmed a little bit telling the story to Sirius only to start crying again when he got to the part about the attack of the house and how it was gone. Sirius tried to tell him that as the actual rightful owner of the house he didn’t care much about its destruction and it was fine for him. However it didn’t seem to help much. At last they got Kreacher to fall back asleep and although he was curled tight into a ball he didn’t look so distressed as before. Apparently finding a master, even one less liked like Sirius, helped the poor elf’s psyche.

Sirius couldn’t believe it. Grimmauld Place! He would never have guessed it. He hated the place. Hated it. It was the last place on Earth he would want to go back to. Yes, the last. Second last was Azkaban obviously, but Grimmauld Place still took the first position because Sirius had been dreadfully miserable there and he had felt it. You didn’t feel much on the way of emotions in Azkaban.

But Harry and Draco had gone and made themselves comfortable there and apparently cleaned a bit and cooked and brought Granger. Maybe they had been miserable too because Sirius couldn’t
conceive anyone being happy in that house, but the idea that they had been there and they had been safe rocked his world. That such a terrible, terrible, place where Sirius had been scarred early in life could somehow come to serve a better purpose was unthinkable.

Of course the fact that it had been destroyed was also extremely satisfying.

“He says they escaped via floo.” Sirius told the small crowd standing on the corridor. He had already told them that. He had in fact started with the fact that Harry, Draco and Hermione Granger were at Grimmauld Place but not anymore, because that was obviously the most relevant fact here. “And something very weird happened when Harry duelled Dickface.”

Sirius was not calling Voldemort Volomon or whatever other alternative people had come with because they were all ridiculous. But he was not calling him You-Know-Who either because Harry and Ron were right, it sounded too much like you were afraid. Dickface was it and he hoped it became popular and that it got back to his ears.

“But…” started to say one of the latest refugees. Originally the meeting was only for Severus and Minerva and Remus and well, all the people you wanted to have around when there might be an emergency. Professor Flitwick, Sprout, Sinistra, some Weasleys. But of course other people had come to see what was going on, including this one, a muggeborn witch on her forties. Tough like a nail and with a grievance to repay. She had lost a brother and a husband to the war, but she had saved a younger brother and a niece, although they weren’t in Hogwarts with her.

They turned to look at her. She had come to the group because she was tough and she was brave and she was willing to fight, but she had arrived to the school less than a week ago and she didn’t have any tasks assigned yet. She was still scared and in pain, there was tension in her shoulders and her arms and in the way she carried herself. She still asked for permission before entering another house that wasn’t Gryffindor, and even in Gryffindor too because she wasn’t a student anymore.

She had cried a bit when she saw the Slytherin common room.

“Transport has been restricted for weeks now. All the lines in the floo network had been redirected to the Ministry.” The witch said. Doreen, yes, that was her name. A ridiculously soft name for such a hard woman.

“What?”

“All fireplaces take you to the Atrium so they can check your travel papers and see if you have permission to move.” The good thing was that she spoke clearly and calmly even though she understood very well what this information meant. She didn’t let panic choke her voice and that was a blessing. “And the Knight Bus has been requiring identification since September or so. It is apparition or nothing. Even flying had become dangerous.”

Oh god.

Oh Merlin.

Oh no, no, no.

But, on the other hand, looking at this calmly. Harry had duelled freaking Voldemort and maybe he hadn’t won but he certainly hadn’t lost. And people dared saying he wasn’t a good wizard. Suck a pickled egg, you! Harry was an excellent wizard and so was Draco and they were both Sirius’ godsons and they were perfect even if Draco went and broke his wand so technically he didn’t count as a wizard anymore. Sirius didn’t care.
Besides, Hermione was there. Sirius thought very highly of her. The girl had kept an adult witch locked in a chives jar for months because that shrew had written mean things about her and her friends. This was exactly the kind of ruthless revenge and overreaction Sirius loved. He wasn’t kidding himself, Harry was too sweet to kill anyone. But Hermione would, oh yes, she would.

***

The floor and the walls were black with green highlights. All very Slytherin he had thought at the time, when he first came to the Ministry. It gave the impression that they were not only underground but underwater too. It was also quiet. Well, not exactly because there was the murmur of a few different conversations, but after the raucous turmoil of Grimmauld Place this place felt muted.

This was not the place where he wanted to be.

Harry had come from the fireplace with such momentum that he had fallen and he was now on his hands and knees, hence the view of the floor. He shook his head and scrambled to get up, eyes darting around looking for two faces and not knowing whether he wanted to find them or not. Probably not. Let this be Harry saying the wrong words and let them be on the Leaky Cauldron. If things went bad, they could run out of the pub. Harry would figure out something.

But no, Hermione was looking at him from across the Atrium, having come from another fireplace. And even if he didn’t understand the words he could tell that was Draco’s voice in a litany of “merde, merde, merde.”

Harry could hazard a guess of what that meant.

“Transport papers and wand, sir.”

“Uh?”

“Papers. And wand.”

A few fireplaces down to his left Draco kept speaking.

“Ceci est une catastrophe, nous sommes foutus. Alors, calme toi, calme toi. Respire.”

“Sir! We NEED to see your PAPERS” one of the Ministry wizards was saying in the standard talking to foreigners style, which is louder and only slightly slower than usual speech. He waved his wand and pointed. “And your wand. For reg-is-tra-tion.”

“La putain de sortie est si loin… Je ne sais pas comment nous sortirons d’ici. Mais heureusement vous êtes un crétin et ne savez pas qui nous sommes.”

“No papers, uh?” Said the wizard standing in front of Harry whom he had been ignoring in favor of looking at Hermione and Draco. He was a big man with a very dark beard. It was so dark it almost looked fake, like it didn’t belong in that face.

“Uuuuh, yes, yes, papers. You know, I think I may have dropped them just before I got in the fireplace.”

“Oh, sure. Never heard that one.”

“Yo, Albretchson!”

Albretchson was obviously the official standing before Harry. He dropped a hand on Harry’s
shoulder before turning around to see who called him. Draco was entangled in an irate discussion with his officer, who kept screaming the same English words again and again while Draco apparently read him the French version of the riot act and gave the impression of being very foreign and very dissatisfied with England. Draco was clutching a pouch, although by now he had stopped using the original bags and instead had little balls of tissue paper with the wand components inside, so pouch wasn’t the word. Perhaps cartridge or even bullet or shell would be better and Harry was perfectly aware that this was not the time to think about it. Please brain, let it go.

Draco had one paper ball on his right hand and three others on the left ready for use. Harry gripped his wand tighter. His assigned wizard obviously hadn’t noticed his scar yet and if they didn’t connect the platinum blonde to the Malfoy name, then maybe they could all walk out of here.

“Doesn’t this one look like the undesirable?” said another wizard, dark grey robes and red lining, from across the atrium. He was standing in front of Hermione and there was a witch dressed with the same grey uniform pointing at her with her wand.

“Wha’?”

Obviously Albretchson was somewhere in the bottom of the barrel of idiots assigned to this job.

“That’s not Potter. It’s a female!”

There was a small pause in Draco’s tirade. A pause that said I am personally offended by your idiocy and considering blowing my fragile cover just to point out the depth of your stupidity, sir. Thankfully he went back to talking to his assigned wizard. He probably was telling him just that, but in French.

“The mudblood, I mean!” cried the wizard. Hermione was keeping silent and smiling beatifically. They hadn’t taken her wand, probably because they hadn’t realized it was one. Still you would think they would take the long pointy needle.

“Ha! He thinks that’s Potter’’ Albretchson chuckled very much in the manner of Vernon Dursley. It is one of the most irritating things in this word: Stupid people who will laugh when someone shows them the truth. He looked at Harry expecting some agreement and some laughter, even if he was still planning to send him to the cells below, and two of the dozen neurons in Albretchson’s mind rubbed together and sparked a thought. A thought about the black haired, green eyed, bespectacled young man standing before him.

“Nocte maxima” said Draco and all the lights in the hall blinked and turned off.

Of course when faced with sudden darkness a wizard’s first instinct is to cast lumos. Very scared of the dark, wizards. Who knows why. They, on the other hand, Draco and Hermione and Harry, were less worried about the darkness and more about punching, kicking and/or hexing the nearest wizard. Nothing personal, although maybe it was a little bit.

There was a short shriek, surprise and pain combined together which spoke of someone being stabbed with Hermione’s needle. Harry pushed Albrethchson to the floor and kicked around until he heard the sound of a wand rolling over the polished floor.

Of course although the darkness gave them a small advantage it was also a problem since they couldn’t see where they were and more importantly where to go. Harry solved this problem quite expeditiously because he knew that Draco was on his left and what’s more he could hear him cursing and something that sounded like an epic slap on the face. There was a gentle flash of purple light, enough to tell Harry where Draco was, and it wasn’t too difficult to grab Draco’s arm and then crab-shuffle to the right until he bumped into Hermione. Once he got a good hold of her Harry simply
There were cries and calls for backup and various attempts at *lumos* that did very little in such a big hall until someone remembered that *lumos maxima* was also a spell that existed. For Merlin’s sake, you all, what a sorry excuse for a wizard you are. Get off the floor Albretchson, they are getting away.

***

*Your attention, please.*

*All Ministry wizards cleared for combat and with authorization to perform arrests are to present themselves in the Atrium immediately.*

*There are three individuals classified as Undesirables, numbers 1, 3 and 4, attempting escape from the premises. We remind you that they are extremely violent and dangerous. Exert caution at all moments.*

*Everyone else please remain calm and alert for any signs of suspicious activity. Remember, it is your responsibility too to help us build a safe environment for true witches and wizards. Collaboration with criminals is a corruption that will not be tolerated. If you see something, alert the appropriate authority immediately.*

***

“WHO in the seven hells is undesirable number two? Who else could ever be deemed more important than Harry Potter?”

“I don’t know about number two, Draco, but Harry is the Undesirable number one for sure.”

Draco blinked quickly looking at the poster Hermione was pointing at that indeed had Harry’s photograph (the one from the Triwizard Tournament) with the number 1 and the reward printed in big bold letters. “Yes, I knew that.” He said, in the same way a cat would pretend not to have fallen from a table and having intended to do that all along. He blinked again. “Wait, does that mean that I am third? I have never been third to anything in my life!”

Some days it was really easy to see that Draco and Sirius were related.

“Nononono. If anything, I am third and you are fourth, Draco.”

Oh, here they were again. It was moments like this when Harry missed Ron so much that he could hold the feeling in his hands. Ron wouldn’t be able to do anything about Hermione and Draco fighting but he was always willing to play some game with Harry to pass the time. Ron had developed quite a philosophical acceptance of the things he couldn’t change, probably because he grew up in the Burrow.

The thing is that Hermione was the best student in the school. Everybody knew that. She was miles and miles above everyone else, with the exception of Draco Malfoy who was breathing hard on her neck and fighting to abandon the second position with all his might. Draco was number one in Potions because Severus blatantly favoured Slytherin students (someone had to, he said), but Hermione was first in Transfigurations because maybe Minerva didn’t want a Slytherin to be first (although she was not giving anything for free to Hermione). People said that going to Arithmancy with them was like going to a gladiatorial fight in which the public could be injured.

To this day, they still fought over the proper plural form of “horcrux” (“If you want me to say
horcruxes then you have to accept animaguses, Granger”). And over that time in their third year when they argued so much about the correct translation in Ancient Runes that someone else gave the right answer before them and got the house points (Professor Babbling had been so relieved!).

Harry, who unless Neville was having a bad day, held the honourable position of being Hogwarts’ worst student, thought that grades weren’t that important to begin with. This wasn’t the typical defence of a bad student, though, not all. It is not that Harry dismissed grades because his were bad. It was just that in his heart of hearts Harry knew he probably was the best student in Potions, but Severus Snape couldn’t very well go giving an Outstanding grade to the son of James Potter. Same with Defence Against the Dark Arts. True, many of the things he could do weren’t on the books and thus couldn’t be graded, but on the topic of dealing with dark creatures he was by far the most knowledgeable student. And he could cast a fully formed patronus before the age of fourteen. He just wasn’t showing it, partly because he really didn’t care about school and partly because he thought it was to his advantage if everyone believed he was a hopeless wizard. Don’t let your enemy know your strengths and all that.

But, to the point.

“You know, I don’t think that list reflects actual threat level” he said, because he should cut the fight short.

Really, those two would drive the Ministry to the ground, or farther underground as the case may be, if it meant getting a better grade in the list of Most Wanted Criminals. For someone who fought so hard against the establishment they were both quite eager to be on top and excel at everything.

For now, though, they all sat on boxes of pre-printed forms and inkwells inside a supplies closet, waiting for the corridor outside to empty while they thought of an escape plan. So far the only good idea they had come with was to find a little visited room (say, the Archives) and accept that they now had to live there because there was no way they were going out through any of the usual exits. It had been made clear that they were all locked and bolted and anyone who came near them would be subjected to a thorough search.

“We will have to move soon” said Hermione. Her eyes kept going back to the poster that announced the reward for Harry Potter and/or his wand. Having the poster in the closet seemed a bit excessive.

Harry dipped his finger in one of the inkwells and proceeded to paint a funny moustache on his photograph.

***

It was a horrible, horrible, horrible, idea but Harry was oddly stubborn about it and quoted the *Odyssey* at them which no one could have expected. Really, what kind of readings had Harry done? But since they could not come up with a better plan they had to settle for this one and prepare for when it inevitably went wrong.

The plan consisted in going back to the Atrium where all the deatheaters (Aurors they were calling them, but come on), all the deatheaters whatever their official classification, were gathering to hunt them down. Harry reasoned that they wouldn’t look for them there and maybe they would learn something important.

There was of course the obvious risk of being recognized and hexed as soon as they got a good look at their faces. But Harry thought that if he focused a lot he could maybe use with the three of them the same magic with which he disguised himself back when he left Hogwarts. It probably wouldn’t be very good, because even then it had been kind of clumsy and he hadn’t really practiced it. But it
would be enough to maybe throw away the first impressions and, as he kept repeating again and again, it wasn’t as if they were simply walking back to the Atrium. Oh no, they had sheep’s fleece, so to speak.

It was unbelievable, but it had been such a weird day already (one in which they had sadly skipped lunch) that they didn’t feel like arguing when the universe handed them a piece of good luck. Hermione had opened one of the cardboard boxes because having official stamped paper was always a useful thing and instead of finding say, pre-signed travel documents, she got three sets of robes in their sizes. One green, the other two somewhere close to magenta.

Why would they store robes there? Three of them. Why? What kind of crazy coincidence was that? There was a piece of paper pinned to them with a smiley face and the letter G.

But as already said, they were growing tired and hungry and official robes plus Harry’s magic were good enough. Better than simply sitting there waiting for someone to cast *homenum revelio* at the door.

Hermione had a hairtie on her wrist, a good resilient one. They had all seen the rubber hairties spontaneously snap and fly away, and on one memorable occasion hit Draco on the neck. He claimed she had done it on purpose although there was no way she could have done so. She tied her hair now in what they had all learn to call in their minds the Ponytail of Serious Business. Harry preferred to wrangle his hair into a braid because he really was some kind of small god of the meadow.

They would go under the monster’s eye and out of the cave, yes they would.

***

“Stop looking at your feet” Harry chastised Hermione in a whisper.

“I am sorry for not wanting them to look at my face” she whispered back angrily.

“It draws attention to you. You should be looking around searching for us.”

Harry was in fact making a show of looking around, bending to look under chairs and tables, peering behind doors and plants and on one occasion lifting a fat’s wizard’s cloak to look at what was beneath. He was also wearing the lime green robes because of course in a sea of grey and gold lined black and the occasional dark magenta he would be the only spot of eyesore green.

The worst part was that it was working. It was so brazen that it seemed that anyone with a half-functioning brain immediately dismissed the possibility of them being anything other than Ministry officials.

Hermione huffed but she did raise her chin and nodded to the next wizard who walked by. The man nodded back and went on.

They kept moving down corridors and stairs and elevators more or less following the flow of wizards that were spreading through the locked Ministry until they had no idea of where they were. Hermione saw a sign that pointed to the Canteen and it was unanimously accepted that they should go there because things are always better when you have just ingested a sandwich.

They stood on a corner so it would look like they were still searching for themselves. It was agreed that the Turkey and Swiss sandwich they were eating was subpar, but the only other option was Egg and Cress and it just did not look like the right choice for either a daring escape or the thorough search they were supposed to do. They also had an apple each. Not a sweet red and gold one, no, but
one of those really green apples that seem to be composed of sourness and tartness and all the vitriol of an old racist relative. All in all it was a sad lunch and the room was extremely cold.

“We are doing this wrong” said Draco as he glared at a junior official who was about to sit in the table closest to them. The man quickly scurried away leaving behind a big chocolate brownie that Hermione had no compulsion to claim for them.

“I think we are doing fine.” Pointed Harry sagely. All things considered they were doing pretty well. Not great, because great required a far better lunch, but they had gotten food and they had gotten, if not away, out of the Ministry’s claws and out of Voldemort’s, um, paws?

No, wait, talons.

“We are no closer to finding an exit and eventually they will start counting or asking for ID.”

That was true. Maybe not that the Ministry would check all of its workers one by one to see if they had some extra people. But they certainly couldn’t keep for long the part about them walking around aimlessly. But what do you want? The place was in lockdown, it is not like they were spoiled for choice of exits.

“We have to start looking for Heads of Department” Draco said, giving up on his apple. It was inedible.

“W- what?”

“Heads of Department? Have you gone mental?”

“No. Listen.” Draco went on, waving them to keep silent. “Heads of Department. It is an unavoidable fact that the higher the position in the superstructure, the more corrupt they are. If someone is going to keep a little something for themselves, it is going to be one of the bosses. We go in, say we are inspecting everyone… They can’t really say no. Eventually someone is bound to have something we can use.”

“I think you are right” Hermione conceded. “And you have no idea how much that annoys me. Both of you are right. I don’t know how to feel about it.”

“In a better world, they would have already caught us.” Harry said, patting her arm. A Hermione-directed Ministry would never have let them run around freely simply because they have gotten the right robes and attitude.

***

It was a good plan and Draco was right, and yet.

Clodius Brownlee, The Head of Transport, was the obvious first choice and indeed he had the floo network opened for him whenever he wanted. However he had already been visited by another patrol which put their current presence under question. All they could find was a collection of pornography in Brownlee’s desk which wasn’t enough to make him open the floo for them and they could not think of another excuse. Perhaps they could had done it, given more time to think, but they were too nervous about it and even though it had been Draco’s idea he still couldn’t believe they were doing such a ridiculously Gryffindor cheeky trick.

Draco looked very disappointedly at the Head of Transport while holding one of the magazines with both hands. Whether it was the possession of the magazine or the lack of convenient dishonesty that caused the disappointment, it wasn’t clear.
“Such debased taste, sir.” Draco tsked at him as he flipped the pages with the barest touch of his fingers. He really knew how to effortlessly talk and act like someone who belonged to the elite, someone whose status was far superior to yours. “I do hope there are no mudbloods in here.”

“Of course not” said the man quickly, although one could wonder if that information was at all available in the magazine. For what little Harry could see it didn’t seem to have much text.

“Although I can’t believe that a proper pureblood witch would accept to be portrayed in such a demeaning position.” Draco frowned. It was not a Severus Snape frown. This one had a different character and it carried more class strength. It was all in the shape of the Malfoys’ eyebrows. “So what it is, mister Brownie?”

“Brownlee.”

“Indeed.” This, however, was a pretty accurate mimicry of Snape’s tone. “Tell me, Mister Brownlee Are you aroused by impure women or by the perversion of properly pureblood witches?”

Clodius Brownlee did not know the right answer to the question and that lack of knowledge took over his mind, erasing any notion of suspicions as to this sudden second visit from the Special Operators.

“I…”

“I will be confiscating this, sir.” Draco rolled the magazine and passed it to Harry. “You can expect the Department of Morality and Pureblood Spirit to follow up with this case. Good day, sir.”

As far as they knew there was no such thing as a Department of Morality and Pureblood Spirit but given that there was an actual Department of Mysteries and that people accepted not knowing what they were doing in there, it didn’t seem like reaching too far.

They tried the subheads of section next.

One was drunk and Harry took his wand and put it in a drawer because it wasn’t safe for him to attempt any magic at the moment. The other had been appointed to the job but no one had ever seen her in the office. She had a house-elf come collect the paycheck.

“Carry on, gentlemen, ladies.” Draco said strutting out. The robes billowing behind him made for a very nice figure, very nice indeed. Harry couldn’t help noticing that.

“Keep alert and don’t hesitate to speak up” Hermione added. She did not carry herself with the majesty and power she wished she had at the moment, but she sounded earnest enough. Truth was that Hermione still had some fears with her and the knowledge that if she were captured they wouldn’t give her a quick death. None of this was easy for her but she was still doing it. Never let it be said that she was no Gryffindor.

Harry said nothing. He was busy enough keeping the shallow glamour that disguised their features. Also, and he had no idea how that happened, he was still holding one of the rolled up adult magazines from the Head of Transport and a small bag of treats that he had acquired by hitting someone on the head with the aforementioned magazine. He had mumbled “morality!” and that had been enough for the poor fellow to relinquish any notion of complaining.

See? A lime green robe (department unknown) and already he was abusing his power. It was things like this that made Harry think he could end up becoming the next dark lord, at least until they told him about the horcruxes. Now he thought he just needed an adult role model who could go for a week without breaking any rules. That ought to teach Harry some proper ethics.
Would Mr. Weaskey…? No, he had a flying car. So who did Harry know that was a law-abiding citizen?

Oh, Percy! Percy seemed very law focused. He would ask him.

***

The Head of Registration and Identification sweated a lot. Certainly more than them who by now had gotten the rhythm of this business and weren’t afraid anymore that Harry’s glamour would fall or that they wouldn’t sound authoritative enough. At Draco’s pressing (Merlin, he just knew how to exactly ask) the man confessed he was accepting bribes and sexual favours in exchange for a name added or dropped from the mudblood list. He also had something called pixy dust in his desk and multiple bottles of troll whiskey. Draco tsked and tutted at him and said he was issuing him a warning. Hermione put a curse on the coat rack when no one was looking.

Registration and Identification was a big space yet it felt closed and airless and too hot, as if they were working from inside a cauldron left too long on the stove.

What a horrible place to be. They were all very glad when they left.

The Head of Financing was skimming money and including all her personal expenditures in the budget. She also had her assistants run personal errands for her. But she had nothing to get them out of the Ministry, not even if they threatened to have her arrested if she didn’t help them to get out. She had spent almost a thousand galleons on the latest broomstick models for her family and yet she was just as stuck as the rest of them in the locked building.

She stared at them, shifting her weight from foot to foot and already blaming her assistant for the embezzlement even though they hadn’t said a word about it. Draco rolled his eyes so hard he must had been able to see the last week.

On their way out, Harry said “morality” again and got them what he had hoped would be a bottle of cold butterbeer but turned out to be simply beer. Still, they drank it between the three of them because they were all hot and thirsty.

The new Head of the Auror Office (freaking Walden McNair because there is no justice in the world) had doubled his fortune by appropriating all the belongings of the muggleborns and halfbloods incarcerated. He allowed his staff to terrorize everyone else, regardless of blood purity, and take whatever they wanted.

But he did not have a way to get them out of there and he smelled bad. Besides this was an actual deatheater, with his arm branded, so they didn’t feel so sure around him. If he got too scared he might murder them right there.

They left quickly. Draco murmured something about them merely following protocol and they would now let McNair continue the good work. They just needed someone from a different department to check on them. Have a good day, sir.

It was odd and irritating. Draco was right when he said that people on the top weren’t following the rules, except for the one rule that would be convenient for them to break today. That rule everybody was following and the whole building was on lockdown. Every two to three minutes they blasted a message about them over the megaphone.

The first half dozen times it made them tense and Hermione couldn’t help jumping a little bit. Draco looked perfectly calm but then again Draco was really good at pushing down his anxiety. He had
spent years looking like everything was fine when it was not.

However, after a while they and everybody else had learned to push the message to the back of their minds and stop paying attention. It was there, a constant reminder of the state of emergency, and everyone’s nerves were frazzled, but it was also becoming routine. They had spent close to three and half hours now wandering around. It was starting to be too long, to become embarrassing that they hadn’t been apprehended.

Your attention, please.

*Three extremely dangerous undesirables, numbers 1, 3 and 4, are attempting to escape the premises. Remain vigilant and cooperate with the officials working to detain them.*

“I hear they went to Registration” Said a witch with blonde half length hair and a cute little dark blue bow on the side of her head. Her friend, all dressed in blue, leaned a little bit to hear better.

They were loitering by the elevators looking at the signs and wondering where to go next. Harry was starting to think of small catastrophes that would force them to evacuate the building. The twins could have helped them with that, what a pity, or Seamus Finnigan.

“They say they entered the place blasting curses and saying terrible things. The Head of the department was being choked by a coat rack when help arrived. Had some bones broken and everything.…”

*Collaboration with criminals is a punishable offence.*

“But did they catch them?”

“Oh, no. Apparently they escaped just in time.” The witch said. Her voice was carefully modulated so as to not betray her feelings about that escape. “Larry says that many of the desks caught on fire” she went on “spontaneously.” She added two or three more extra vowels to the last word. Why, it almost gave the impression that the fire might had been deliberately provoked by the workers there. “They lost weeks of work.”

*Remember: Failing to report suspicious activity is considered treason.*

“Oh, dear, that’s a pity! The blue-dressed witch said quickly and primly.

“Yes!” answered the witch, and this time there was quite a lot of happiness in her voice.

They waited in silence for the two women to get on the elevator and leave. At last they were once more alone.

“Did we…?”
“I only did the coat rack.” Hermione said.

“Oh, okay.” Harry took a deep breath. “I wanted to burn it all down, but I don’t think I got to it. But maybe a put a delayed curse without noticing.”

Or maybe people were seizing the opportunity when they saw it.

“Here.” Draco pointed with a long white finger to the departments’ sign. Very nice hands, Draco’s. Harry was a big fan of them and the things they could do. “We haven’t tried this one.”

*Your attention, please.*

*Three extremely dangerous…*

“This message is becoming grating.”

“Half per cent of my drive to get out of here is to stop listening to it.” Harry admitted.

And so, tired and irritated and with their hunger only a bit sated, they knocked on the door of the office of the Head of Propaganda and Communications.

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“And the fireplace is appropriately closed.” Draco was magnificent at this. Draco would make a really good spy or conman. Except he had spent a summer without suffering from anxiety and he had found that he quite liked the feeling and he would prefer not make a habit of this.

“Yes, sir.” The Head of Propaganda and Communications answered.

“It is blocked and redirected to the Atrium like every other fireplace part of the floo network.”

“Oh, of course.”

The office was big, but it felt a bit crowded with the four of them there. Specially because they kept trying to stand close together and they could feel the curious stares of the people working outside.

“Are you quite sure, Madam?” Draco asked with that Malfoy tone that implied that they already knew the answer but were nevertheless giving you the gracious opportunity to explain yourself.

She hesitated a little bit. Hermione gave her a serious frown. She wasn’t anxious anymore. She was, like her wand, hard and sharp and full of power.

“Well this is the fireplace in my private office, you understand.” Said the Head of Propaganda and Communications in an generally friendly manner. She had a voice, this woman. One of those voices that made you contemplate sticking a pen in your ears. “High officials such as myself are given certain privileges. We do perform a very important job.”

Hermione’s frown increased. She did not approve of rule breaking and she had had a day full of it.

“This is a serious matter we are investigating.” Said Hermione with a gravity that was all too real. Like that time Seamus set their beds on fire and they all thought McGonagall was going to chuck him out the window. “Top Five Undesirables.”
“Yes, yes, of course. I am aware.” Funny how uncomfortable this woman, the Head of Propaganda, looked even now if she was still valiantly trying to smile.

“Collaboration with criminals is a corruption that will not be tolerated.” Hermione went on. She was terrifying. Harry could almost feel bad. He didn’t, not at all, but he guessed he could.

“Of course not. I- I came up with that line, you know.” She said, puffing her chest out and toying with a pearl necklace. She was wearing a big ring with a silver snake holding a green stone in its jaws that she was hoping they would notice.

“So what kind of privileges are we talking about?” Draco asked. Draco was being the good cop to Hermione’s cold assurance of murder. “Surely not a direct line!” He smiled smoothly. It was the warm smile of a lioness that was going to hunt you down and feed you to her cubs.

“Well, ehem, no. I go through the same security protocols just as anyone else when coming in.” The Head of Propaganda assured them in a posh proper accent that was very irritating. “Polyjuice use is a very serious concern of ours. We know that plenty of mudbloods have made use of it to impersonate proper pureblood wizards, just as they often steal their wands an—”

“Times is of the essence here, Madam.” Hermione interrupted, probably because if she had to keep hearing this she was going to blow their cover in a spectacular manner. Out of all the departments, they had to come here… “I believe all this blabbering could be considered obstruction.”

“I agree.” Draco still sounded amicable which made that agreement all the more terrifying. Like he would politely and cheerfully escort you to your execution.

“No, nonono, please.” She begged, and this was the key. You put them against the wall, showed them they had done something wrong and they started defending themselves and completely failed to notice the strangeness of the situation. They stopped wondering at the three random Ministry workers investigating the place rather than some proper deatheaters-turned-Aurors.

No one’s position is secure in a dictatorship. They only had to remind them of this.

“I just meant to say, I come in like everyone else, but I can use the fireplace for going out. I have already gone through security by then, you see, and this is more efficient with my time. Just a short list of pre-checked locations, of course, it wouldn’t do to have the fireplace completely open. The Minister himself signed on it.”

Promising. Very, very promising. But this only added to the tension they were all feeling.

“We will have to check all of them.”

“Just my house, you know, and a couple of shops in Diagon Alley, and—”

“Uh-hu. Address?” Draco extended an elegant hand.

She showed them the list, frowning and with lips pursed. She was perhaps starting to realize that this was not at all the usual manner in which an investigation was conducted.

“I didn’t know there were people cleared for combat down in the Archives” she said, probably referring to Harry. At least she was speaking in his direction. So that’s what the lime-green robes meant! Well that was just plain wrong, lime green was not and should not be the colour for Archives. Archives should be orange or brown, probably a boiler orange.

“There had been attempts at tampering” he said simply. He couldn’t spare much attention for talking,
focused as he was on keeping the glamour up. He had to work extra hard when there was many people looking, doubly so if they knew their faces.

Draco was chest deep in the fireplace, the green flames of the floo licking at his robes. “Oh, lovely curtains!” They heard him say before emerging back. “And I assume the fireplace is protected from that end?”

“Well of course. I am a High Official. I am sure many a mudblood or muggle would love to try something against me, or at the very least gain unlawful access to this office through my residence. We, Propaganda and Communications, are one of the most important pillars of the state, if not the most”

“The Department of Morality and Pureblood Spirit will love to hear that” Hermione said in a glacial tone.

This was it. Draco had been right, they never followed their own rules. They could go out and… They would figure out what to do next once they were out of here. This was it.

“Will that be all?” Asked the witch. The hand with the ring was now in her hair, bringing attention to the silver snake earrings. As if a stupid pair of earrings would make her more of a pureblood. At this point Harry wouldn’t be surprised if she turned out to be muggleborn.

“One last check, I think, and we will be on our way” Draco said, throwing them a very meaningful glance. He was clutching the snake-decorated jar with the floo powder. Of course that wouldn’t delay them much, but better if they took the powder with them.

Harry started to discretely shuffle closer to the fireplace while Draco went on a detailed and spiralling explanation of that “one last check” to keep everyone distracted. The fireplace wasn’t very big, they would have to really squeeze together.

The Head of Propaganda and Communication frowned once more, her eyes going from Draco to Harry and Hermione. It really was hard to keep the glamour up and there was quite a lot of people pretending not to look at them through the glass. She had already been suspicious and now she was starting to wonder, to doubt herself.

“What was her name again?” Hermione was right behind Harry, asking in a careful whisper. Her voice clung to the neck of her robe. “Colores?”

Harry sniggered. “Dolores.”

Hermione pushed Harry towards the fireplace with her hip. He had no idea what she wanted to do, but just in case Harry took hold of her arm, his right hand already gripping Draco’s.

Draco tossed half the contents of the jar to the fireplace and stepped in, dragging them behind. Hermione looked over her shoulder and smiled and it wasn’t cruel exactly because Hermione was not a cruel girl, not at all. She was good and she was kind and she cared about house-elves. But this woman, this despicable monster, she was cruel and a sadist and she had escaped with no punishment for her actions and now they were seeing her here, in the top seats. There was a war and people were suffering and this woman who once denied the return of Voldemort was here thriving.

So yes, there was a bit of pleasure in Hermione’s smile for the pain she was about to inflict.

“Thank you so much for your help, Dolores.” Hermione spoke low enough that it could still be called a whisper, but loud, oh! loud enough that all the eavesdroppers by the door would hear and report back. “We wouldn’t have made it without you. Truly, you have a friend in Hermione Granger.”
The words were followed by a screech. Half of it produced by Dolores Umbridge who was darting forwards trying to grab them and forgetting there was a chair in the way. The other half belonged to Draco who was clutching Harry’s hand tight in excitement while he squealed like a new-born goat.

Harry pulled Hermione into the fireplace and it was just for a second or two, but still Harry dropped the glamour completely and winked at the audience. If he weren’t holding fast to Hermione and Draco, he would have waved. It was just a second or two before Draco got a hold of himself long enough to bellow Umbridge’s address and disappearing through the floo, but for those two second everyone near Umbridge’s office could get a glimpse of the three undesirables escaping.

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Imagine the fire. The fire of the fireplace from which they escaped, the fire in the Department of Registration and Identification where the names of the muggleborn and halfblood burned, the fire boiling the blood of the death eaters, of Voldemort. The absolute fury that swept over the Ministry.

Imagine then a room where there was no fire, no smell of smoke, not the sound of cracking wood. A room where nothing warm ever entered. A place that wasn’t cold but... aseptic. Empty of everything worldly. In that room, far away from the fire of the world, a woman waited. The lady in white.

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The escape, first from Grimmauld Place and later from the Ministry, brought consequences. Voldemort was furious and scared, so scared, and he couldn’t show the latter so he put all the energy on the former.

The officials minding the fireplaces, Albrechtson and the others, were summarily executed which was tragic and fortunate in a way. Maybe they were good people doing their job and trying to survive in a mad world, or maybe they were bad and had enjoyed their work a bit too much as they sent person after person to the holding cells. Maybe they really believed in Voldemort’s fantasy of a pureblood world or maybe they just enjoyed the opportunities the new regime offered, the fact that they were the ones on the right side of the holding cells when the door closed.

Whatever they were, it didn’t matter now because they were dead. They were killed quickly though so they could consider themselves very lucky.

The Dark Lord was angry and he wanted to exact a punishment fitting to his rage. The quick deaths of the Transport officers weren’t enough.

So the others, the Chief of Security that let them escape, the stupid woman who opened her fireplace, even the Head of Registration who allowed his office to burn, they were in for a long trial that would be torture on itself and then some classic torture as they were interrogated and eventually, unless something truly miraculous happened, death.

The problem with this kind of regimes is that they don’t treat anyone well. Not even their own.

Through all this Narcissa Malfoy said nothing.

When he arrived to the manor at the end of the day her silence was a balm to Voldemort. She kept her mouth closed and her eyes downcast and her hands always ready to serve him.

Sometimes she noticed him looking at her and she bore his gaze standing tall and straight and silent, like those Greek statues of women at the entrance of a temple, letting her eyes get lost in the distance. She hated that gaze and she also feared a little bit what could be in there, but she endured it with calm and grace.
Narcissa used to dress in black and green and whatever colour his husband chose for her, but lately she liked dressing in white. She felt that the white was both a shroud and an armour, surrounding her and making her this white silent figure, this miracle of marble that moved. Nobody spoke to the lady in white because nobody thought the stone could answer back.

“Bellatrix speaks Spanish” Voldemort had said to her one day. He was slouching on an armchair, sitting with his legs spread open like men are given to do. What a funny thing that women are told to spread their legs like an insult, like a demeaning obligation, yet men would do it unprompted.

Narcissa was assaulted by the thought that out of the whole world only she was privy to the most private moments of Voldemort. The times when he allowed himself to lean back and rest his legs, when he let his head fall back on the back of the chair. She thought that he might be having sex with Bella and with that other young man, one of the Mulcibers, but even them didn’t get to see this. She wasn’t sure what exactly was it. He was not vulnerable with her, nor honest, but there was something less controlled about him, less of a projected image.

He was more at ease. He allowed himself to be almost ugly, almost normal, almost… human.

Thrice already Narcissa had seen him drink, even if she never saw him eat anything.

“Yes, my lord.” Narcissa had mastered a tone that without being an irritatingly meek whisper still managed not to sound like an intrusion. A voice that wasn’t a voice.

“No, my lord.”

Spanish was too emotional. It was a wonder that Bella had been allowed to study it because a pretty young woman like herself speaking Spanish was almost sinful, especially with her mouth and her lips. But then again Bella was allowed all the inappropriate things that were forbidden to Narcissa and she still managed to find a hardness in the language. She spoke Spanish less like the seductress she sometimes wanted to be and more like an acolyte to Torquemada.

“But you speak other languages.” Voldemort had continued. Others perhaps would find it vexing that Narcissa gave the shortest answers possible and never provided information without prompt, but not Voldemort. He liked to feel in control, like he could pluck her very thoughts out of her brain.

“Yes, my lord.” Narcissa had said, and then because there were some limits she added “French and German.”

“Say something in German.” Voldemort ordered now with a wave of his hand. He remembered. A short exchange from weeks ago and he remembered. He was a powerful wizard but more than anything he was a man that seemed to know all, a man who could find your most private thoughts and gently take them to the surface and from there keep them in his mind. He knew everything and he didn’t forget.

But he waved at Narcissa now because with her around, he sometimes rested his wand on a side table by his armchair (that used to be Lucius’). Such little threat Narcissa was that he could allow himself the luxury of not holding his wand in his hand at all times.

“Knabe sprach: Ich breche dich, Röslein auf der Heiden.” She said at once, because if you are asked to say something in another language it is always good to recite a poem or a riddle. Everybody hates the question, what do you want me to say. They don’t care. They just want to hear you speak and do the trick. “Röslein sprach: Ich steche dich, dass du ewig denkst an mich, und ich will's nicht leiden.”
“It is good Narcissa.” The monster said to her. “I may ask you to do it again some other time. You may retire now.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Narcissa recites a verse from the poem “Little Rose of the Field” by Goethe. It can be translated as something like “The boy said ‘I’ll now pick thee,/ Heathrose fair and tender!/ The rosebud said ‘I’ll prick thee, / So that thou’lt remember me,/ Ne’er will I surrender!’”

Torquemada was the first Great Inquisitor in Spain.
The world was grey and pink as it often is in the hour during the sunrise. It was also cold and quiet. It was going to be a nice sunny day and at midday the sun would be shining and it would be almost hot given the season. But right now the night dew was frozen and it made a soft “crunch crunch crunch” when someone trod through the grounds of Hogwarts. Not that there were many people outside or even awake given the hour. The house-elves would rise in fifteen minutes or so to start preparing breakfast, but no one would stir for at least an hour. Probably two in the case of the youngest inhabitants of the castle and Ron Weasley.

Minerva McGonagall was awake, though. Her hair which was usually in a neat bun was tied into a messy braid that fell over her left shoulder. She hadn’t rose early that day. She simply hadn’t been able to sleep that past night.

She went down the front path and veered right, descending to the shore of the lake. The “crunch crunch” of the grass and the leaves and the dew was extremely satisfying. She was wearing a soft and casual dress, the kind one would put on when at home to be comfortable, and she had thrown a thick tartan cloak over it to fight the cold. Madam Pomfrey would give her peppermint potion if she needed it, but Minerva saw no reason to invite a cold anyway. Just before leaving her rooms she had traded her slippers, warm, comfortable, also with a tartan pattern, for a pair of heavy and sensible shoes. The ground was a bit slippery but mostly Minerva wanted the kind of footwear that allowed for a good kick and stomp.

Minerva took a deep breath when she arrived to the grave. Her chin tall and her shoulders back. She had always carried herself with the majesty of an ancient queen.

No other Headmaster or Headmistress had ever been laid to rest inside the grounds of Hogwarts. But Dumbledore was the exception because he had been exceptional in everything in his life. An incredibly powerful wizard, the man who defeated Grindelwald, the only one Voldemort ever feared. And he was also Minerva’s tutor and mentor, the man who helped her become an animagus. He was also the one who showed compassion to the rejects, to the young Scamander that was expelled from Hogwarts, to Hagrid not too long after, to poor wee Remus Lupin who could never have dreamed of being accepted in the school.

Minerva threw her head back slightly and she spit on the grave.

That wasn’t enough.

She kicked the white marble.

“You utter bastard.”

Those that are higher in our esteem hurt us the most when they fall.

Minerva turned around not wanting to stay too long there. She didn’t trust herself. She could see herself hitting the grave until it crumbled and it were nothing more than a small pile of fine white sand.

They had learned of the floo interception around midday. Severus said that he had already been scared witless once, when Harry fell from the sky, and he had henceforth decided to give himself a
twenty-four hours period of grace before worrying about Harry. He also refused to leave the castle despite how much everyone begged him to because he argued, not without reason, that it would look extremely suspicious if he were to suddenly drop by the Ministry.

Minerva wasn’t sure, and she thought no one else was either, of when exactly had Severus started to help Remus Lupin. But there was something in his voice just then that told her that it may have been earlier than anybody thought. The way he spoke of Harry, the damned sureness that he would be alright, that he was too dear to die, too precious for life to let go of him so easily, was exactly the same way Remus spoke of him.

That was at lunch time. By tea time, when they were all done with their classes, the house-elf had gotten back enough of his strength that he could be interrogated, although still laying in bed and with Pomfrey frowning at them. After he got too agitated, Pomfrey kicked them all out and only Sirius stayed to get the rest of the story.

Sirius told them of what seemed like a \textit{priori incantatem} caused by twin wands duelling each other. Extremely rare, Flitwick explained. Extremely rare yet it happened and allowed the three children to escape. Sirius was nervous and kept jumping from foot to foot and almost walking in circles, but he delivered the words. He gave them the story just like the beekeeper collects the honey without hurting the hive, careful and cleanly. He told them how Kreacker spoke about Draco being there and of dear Hermione.

Oh, they knew she had been rescued, but still hearing once again that she was all right, that she was with them… Minerva just really needed her to survive the war. Minerva wanted everyone to survive but if there was a casualty she knew she couldn’t take it would be that of Hermione, plus Harry and Ron. Not those three, please, no.

And then Sirius spoke of some more impossible things. He told them about a task that Regulus (poor doomed child) had given the house-elf and about the kids helping him complete it. Everybody who mattered was there, much like in the old Order meetings. All the teachers plus the twins of course, who were very much adults even if they behaved like kids, and a few of the most powerful refugees. Lovegood however had been sent to dinner and then bed. So were Parkinson, Weasley (Ron) and Longbottom, who noticed something was going on and tried to eavesdrop.

At Sirius’ description of the locket and how it was impossible to destroy and yet they did it professor Slughorn grew pale and dropped in a chair. Severus was perfectly tense and tight, like a metal rod buried in the stone.

“He knows, then” is all he said.

They had explained. Severus had made Slughorn go first while he poured himself a cup of scalding hot tea. Slughorn told them about horcruxes and the questions Tom Riddle asked decades ago and the ones Dumbledore asked barely a year before. He told them and it was bad, a conversation that involved horcruxes was necessarily bad, but also good in a way because it gave them a path. Find the horcruxes, destroy them (not easily done, but possible), finish Voldemort. Apparently some horcruxes had already been destroyed and it made you wonder why Dumbledore had kept so quiet about it when this was their only chance of winning.

While Slughorn spoke Severus kept silent, too silent perhaps. Remus was looking at him and at the room with an intense gaze, assessing each and every one of them. They worked very well together.

Severus explained. He spoke with a voice Minerva had never heard before, a voice completely devoid of that velvet quality of his. It was as if a completely different person were speaking.
Harry was a horcrux.

Harry was a horcrux and Albus had been preparing for his death probably since the moment he let him at the Dursleys’ doorstep and Minerva, stupid, gullible, Minerva didn’t fight harder his decision. Harry was a horcrux and as long as he lived so would Voldemort, so it had been decided (by Albus) that Harry had to die.

Pomona Sprout broke the tea cup she was holding, soaking her skirt and her shoes. Sirius started hyperventilating and had to sit on the floor before passing out with Remus kneeling by his side petting his forehead. Fred and George were holding hands and looking like little children when they had been acting so much like adults for the past few weeks. (Truly they had been exceptional in cheering the first and second years). Hagrid cried and cried and it seemed like he would never stop, like he would become a fountain and his tears would make a river.

Harry had to die.

“There is, of course, an alternative.”

At this moment Severus could have asked them all to snap their wands and cut their right hand and they would have done it. Even Sinistra, and she had never liked the boy very much. Even Slughorn, and he hadn’t even met Harry. Anything but sending a child to his death. Anything. If you are willing to sacrifice a child you don’t deserve to be saved.

But no, Severus told them, there was a third option. They could just… wait. Kill Voldemort as much as he could be killed, reduce him to the undead form of the past decade. Make sure that even if he was not truly dead he was not completely alive either. Just push him out his throne and don’t let him crawl back. And then… wait. Wait for Harry to live his natural happy life. He did not need to die before he turned twenty. He did not need to die younger than his parents.

Or so had Severus planned. The fact that Harry was destroying horcruxes said that he knew and who doubted that Harry would sacrifice himself? It was what Dumbledore had been counting on and he was an extremely good judge of character. He had only been wrong twice in his life.

It was a terrible evening and a terrible night and Minerva couldn’t sleep at all.

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The town of Chillington could easily be considered a fully wizarding town, like Hogsmeade, were it not because of the squib presence which naturally robbed them of that title. Still, their numbers had been drastically reduced in the past few months together with some other people of hardly desirable qualities, so the good habitants of Chillington might still see their town classified as a fully wizarding one.

The wizarding population had left its mark in Chillington, giving a charming eclectic air to the place. Often houses had seven chimneys or one single chimney that by no means should be standing. There were doorknockers in the shape of dragons that would bite the hand of unwelcome visitors and weathervanes that would advise you to take an umbrella.

There was also a quaint house, not too far from the main square, that attempted to combine in its decoration pink and crochet and kitties with the silver and green of Slytherin and a truly prodigious amount of snakes. It went as well as it could be expected which is to say not very well at all. This didn’t deter either the owner of the house or the multiple other magical folks who had taken a sudden interest in Slytherin paraphernalia and magical antiquities that they exhibited claiming they were family heirlooms.
Currently the house had each and every one of its windows broken and the main door had been ripped from its hinges. There was a dozen angry wizards patrolling the streets of Chillington and everybody was pretending there was nothing to worry about. However, seeing one of the big ones fall was very worrying indeed so they had to pretend very hard.

Two streets down there was another house with broken windows and a broken door. It was a house full of dust and dry leaves brought by the wind during the months it had been unoccupied. There was hardly any pink or Slytherin green in it. There were the charred remains of what had been a poster with the Gryffindor crest hung on a bedroom door and on the floor, trampled and creased, two photos of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Harry was in one of them, looking less serious and sad than how he usually looked in pictures. It must had been taken after they won the cup, but Harry couldn’t quite remember having posed for it. He must have, though, because he was smiling at the camera and he had both his arms over the twins’ shoulders. Fred and George were lifting him in the air so Harry’s face would be at the same height as everyone else’s.

There were other pictures in the house, other posters, other books. Some of the pictures didn’t move and that was enough to tell the story of what had happened in that empty and dusty house. It was a tragedy and Harry didn’t know whether he wanted to look around or not to find the name of the previous inhabitants.

But it was also useful to them. It was terrible to think in those terms because they did not want to make that tragedy meaningful or honourable, they did not want it to acquire any other meaning beyond the horrible act that it had been, the rape of that house and the family that lived there. It had been bad and just because now it was useful to them it didn’t make it any less bad. It certainly didn’t make it good. It was of use, perhaps, but not useful. There, that was a better way to think about it.

But what a use indeed. The house had been abandoned not only in a physical way but in the collective memory. You did not think of those who were gone. You did not think of them and you did not mention them, not even to say good riddance and that it was about time. You didn’t speak of those who were gone lest someone draw some similarities between them and you, lest someone remember that they were your neighbours and didn’t you use to watch over their kids? Didn’t you use to go to the Quidditch games together?

No, it was safer to let them drop out of your mind, just as it had once been easy and convenient to forget about the lazy and unemployed son of Lyall Lupin.

They had had almost a year to forget about that house. Now it was as if the building wasn’t there.

There was a basement with a tiny, easy to board, window. They stayed down there while the death eaters patrolled the streets and registered all the houses in Chillington. All the houses except the empty houses. Houses that felt so empty, so cold and abandoned, that it was impossible to picture them with any living creature inside, not even a stray cat or a bunch of pigeons.

Well, they might had done some magic to strengthen that thought. But not consciously. It is just that these houses felt very empty.

“This place is abandoned” they heard say. A male voice, it was always a male. There were some heavy steps in the ceiling above them and each creak of the wood should had been terrifying, but they hardly felt anything. There had never been people hiding in a basement that were so little scared. They were silent, yes, because the situation called for silence, but there wasn’t even a tense grip in their wands as they prepared for someone to come down the stairs. They merely waited to see what happened. It was as if they didn’t mind one way or another whether they were found or not. They had seen many things that day, too many things.
“Just let me have a look” called the other voice. Younger, a bit squeakier. The floorboards creaked some more. “There is nothing” he called after less than a minute.

“Told ya, let’s go.”

“Wait.”

“What now?”

There was some laughter and some more noise near the entrance.

“Eh? What do you think?” said the squeaky voice.

“This is hardly the time, Shunpike.” The deeper male voice said, already moving away from the house. “We have a job to do and we can’t be seen wasting time.”

Later, much later, when it was daytime again and they dared going upstairs and peeking outside, they would see they had written MUD BLOOD, BAD BLOOD across the entrance with crude and uneven letters. Draco stared at it for a very long time and Harry just knew that half his anger came from how bad the handwriting was, how *ugly*. It was an insult but it was also poorly executed.

That would be later. Tonight Harry sneaked upstairs and looked for any food there might still be in the kitchen while Hermione and Draco made some improvised bedding downstairs and checked that no one outside would see if Hermione lighted a small fire in a jar.

It had been a ridiculously long day. Harry had duelled Voldemort and after the hours spent running through the Ministry it seemed as if the duel had happened long ago. But it had been today, it had been in the morning of this ridiculously long day for which they had not been prepared. Hermione was only wearing a cami under her robes, Harry’s socks were mismatched and Draco didn’t have any socks at all. It had been a long day and they didn’t have a knut between the three of them and also Harry had lost his Walkman. But they were alive and Harry had found a pack of flour and that, together with some humming, allowed him to produce a decent dinner. Certainly better that what they were serving in the Ministry’s canteen.

“It was my fault, wasn’t it?” said Harry hollowly. There were still some crumbs on the plate and he wanted to press his finger on them and eat them, but he felt like he didn’t deserve those crumbs.

“That you said Tom Riddle’s awful nickname, yes” Draco extended his hand, beautiful, beautiful hand, and swiped a finger to get the crumbs Harry had been watching. He licked his finger. “I have been saying it since first year, Potter, you have too big a mouth.”

Harry was oddly grateful that Hermione was there. Otherwise he might have told Draco what other things fitted in his big mouth besides a golden snitch and while he thought it would be an excellent comeback he wasn’t sure he could follow through.

“But everything else was *his* fault” Draco went on. “You can’t take responsibility for other people’s bad actions.”

“Listen to him, Harry” said Hermione, her head bent down and focused on the toothbrushes she was transforming out of teaspoons.

He listened. He still felt bad for his mistake, but he didn’t feel anymore like all the horrors they had witnessed today were his fault. They were Voldemort’s crimes and just because Harry couldn’t stop him sooner it didn’t make him guilty of them.
“Besides, I think today was kind of useful” Hermione was handing them their toothbrushes. They had found a half empty tube of toothpaste earlier as they went through the house. “We weren’t going any further with our research and we needed a push to action.”

That said, she went to brush her teeth on the basin by the corner. There was something in her eyes however that said she wasn’t done.

She spit.

“That fucking snake was a horcrux for sure.”

“Dear Merlin, Granger! Warn a man.” Cried Draco.

“But Hermione!”

No one had ever heard Hermione swear.

Correction, no male had ever heard Hermione swear. Ginny had heard plenty, so did Lavender and Parvati. The boys, not so much, and they were suitably scandalized.

“Ug, I am too tired to think about it now.” Hermione went on, ignoring them. “But that is a horcrux we didn’t know about. Another in Hogwarts, and we are just missing one, probably a relic in some deatheater’s house. I am going to bed.”

That said, she let herself fall in the middle of the bed. It was an excellent bed and both Draco and Hermione had made a truly good job transforming it from a bunch of cardboard boxes. Why they had only made one was a question that didn’t merit an answer. It was cold. It was cold outside (what month was it? It felt like summer had been two days ago but they had yelped when they stepped outside Umbridge’s house) and it was cold in the house and colder still in the basement. They had had a long and hard day and no one could begrudge them if they needed some physical comfort in the form of a shared cozy bed.

Draco followed suit. They did not have pyjamas nor the energy to make some but he wasn’t about to go to sleep with the scratchy tunic he had been wearing all day. He stripped quickly down to his shirt and underwear and he burrowed under the blankets. There was a soft complain about someone’s feet being cold, in Harry’s experience it could be either of them.

Tomorrow they could think more about the snake and the horcruxes and where to go and what to do. For today, they had done enough. They had survived, which was a very big achievement all by itself and if nothing else they had stirred the Ministry a little bit. Showed them that there were people still fighting.

Harry joined them. Both of them had their eyes closed but Draco pawed blindly until he could find a shoulder or a waist over which to throw an arm. He sighed in satisfaction when he found it and Harry’s heart gave a leap at the utter contentment in Draco’s face. Hermione smiled and extended her hands, fingers barely touching Harry’s. It was quiet and serene and it was all right. They were all right.

Harry closed his eyes and allowed himself to relax, taking deep and slow breaths. His brain that until now had still been in overdrive started to wind down, shutting the door on thoughts and letting go of the fear and the stress of the day.

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“So, is there any potion or spell to change one’s sex?”
“Harry, I am really tired.” Hermione’s voice came quite clear despite being buried under two moderately sized pillows, a third small one, two blankets, and her hair.

“But-”

“Sssh, sleep now.” Draco shuffled a bit to throw a leg in addition to his arm over Harry’s body. It was very nice. Harry liked feeling Draco close a lot.

Still. He had a thought. A burning question.

“But I was wondering…”

“Yes. There is, but the effects are quite short in time.” Hermione snapped. Her fingers twitched, probably she wanted to make a bigger gesture but she couldn’t. “Go to sleep, now.”

“Okay, all right. Thanks.”

…

…

… …

… … …

“Granger, how do you even know that?”

“…”

“No, please. I am not going to be able to sleep now.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Harry. “See? It is not like I do it on purpose. The questions just come.”

Hermione hadn’t moved, yet she managed to somehow express her displeasure with an intake of breath.

“Research for a friend.” She said. It was a funny thing because oral speech doesn’t really have much in the way of punctuation, but she managed to stress the full stop at the end of her words. It was a full stop, end of line, paragraph and page.

“What friend? You don’t have friends outside of Hogwarts. Merlin and Morgana, is there someone in Gryffindor who wants to switch bedroom sides?”

“Draco.”

“Going to sleep now.”

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“But you would tell me if it were Lovegood, wouldn’t you?”

“… I think she is asleep, Draco.”

“Ah.”

“Why do you care in any case?”
Draco said nothing. Harry could feel him very much not saying anything.

“If I am not going to be the only male with platinum white hair I want to know.” He admitted at last. Harry snorted and pressed a soft kiss in the closest area of naked skin. “I would have to rebrand.”

“I doubt it is Luna.”

Draco had a knack for giving Harry quick answers and sending him to sleep, but Harry just knew how to make him feel at peace.

***

They slept until late. They were still at that age when one can happily sleep for fourteen hours and not give oneself jetlag. The age when sleep is deep and good. It was years before their bodies betrayed them and decided that actually eight hours of sleep a night is perfectly fine and will make you wake up early on Saturday mornings even when you don’t have to.

No, they slept like the dead, tight and fast and warm despite the cold in the house and the world around them. At some point Harry woke a little bit, just enough to notice that he was half-asleep and that it was very enjoyable. Hermione’s back was against his while Draco was burrowed in his chest and, well, it seemed like Draco was having a pleasant dream too.

It should be more awkward, but they had spent many nights together, before they invented kissing, when they found some part of their bodies standing to attention. Mostly they just shifted a bit so as to not poke the other person (it was only polite) but kept sleeping in each other’s arms because building a bubble of warmth and comfort together was more important. It was what kept them sane.

Draco squirmed and wriggled all so he could liberate an arm and smack Harry in the face. It was probably an ingrained mechanism of defence lest someone say that Slytherins could be soft and cuddly.

Harry sighed and extricated himself from the tangle of blankets and limbs to go see if he could make some breakfast. He was able to produce some porridge which was a very sad way to start the day when you could be having bacon and eggs and croissants. But at least there was some flavour to it and also pumpkin juice and tea.

What he could not make was new clothes. They were stuck with only four socks (Draco wasn’t wearing any and he lamented it profoundly, Harry’s were still mismatched), a Kenmare Kestrel sweater (Harry), a Montrose Magpie sweater (Draco), and a plain white cami (Hermione). Fortunately, everyone had a pair of trousers. Although “pair” wasn’t fair because it was a single unit, although with two legs. They also had three Ministry robes that they probably shouldn’t keep using. Even if they transformed them into something else, they were sweaty and felt as if they were covered in the toxic ambience of yesterday. The envy and the cruelty and the corruption.

“I need a notebook” Hermione said after breakfast. “And a sweater. But the notebook first.”

***

Percy Weasley was extremely tired and overworked and anxious about all the people he couldn’t save but this didn’t necessarily affect his personal brand of acerbic sense of humour. Honestly he couldn’t understand why everyone always thought of him as the boring one. Percy was hilarious.

Percy had purchased a box of skiving snacks back when his brother’s shop was still open. Incidentally it also offered an excellent opportunity to test his disguise for when he had to do more on-hands work and risked being recognized.
(His father. He meant rescuing his father. What an infuriating little man. Most people allowed
themselves to be manipulated by Percy and steered away from trouble. But not him, oh no. He had to
be an example of liberal pureblood. On five different occasions Percy had had to personally go and
push/pull/physically restrain Arthur in some manner until the window closed and the opportunity to
get himself killed passed. How he could get in so much trouble when he was supposed to be deep in
hiding Percy didn’t know).

On Tuesday he popped one sick green jellybean and made a discreet show of working through a
nasty case of nausea until the Minister himself told him to go home. Percy begged not to and insisted
he could still work before finally relenting an hour later and saying he would take a couple of days
off.

Wednesday was the day when one disaster gave way to another and no one knew what to do but
every single person working in the Ministry was frightened and tired from hearing that security
announcement nonstop. Percy spent the morning at home catching up on sleep and eating chocolate
chip muffins in his recently acquired yoga clothes. He went back to the Ministry in the late afternoon,
looking sick and pale and oh so devoted. Percival Weasley, heard there was an emergency in the
Ministry and came to work despite being sick. Now here was a wizard on whom you could rely.

Hilarious.

The execution of those poor idiots by the fireplaces was not, but Percy couldn’t find an ounce of
emotion to feel sorry for them. There were many more people far more deserving of his sympathy.
He was junior assistant to the Minister himself, he would know.

***

Minerva went through the morning in a daze, with a headache behind her eyeballs from the lack of
sleep. Still, there was classes to impart and a school full of kids and adults to keep organized. After
lunch Severus was planning on going to London in disguise and see what he could learn. Maybe he
would take Remus or one of the twins with him and Minerva would be in charge of the castle in his
absence.

Some of the children had noticed that there was something wrong. Ronald Weasley kept glancing at
them and Longbottom (and sweet Morgana, how much he had changed and grown) also had a look
of concentration.

The professor’s table was very quiet at lunch time.

Sirius Black came to them, dark shadows under his eyes and a wild look. He did not have the
constitution to go through so many emotions as he did yesterday, from joy to fear to relief to more
fear and then the utter despair as they heard of the horcruxes. Minerva worried for him. After all, he
had once been so upset by his friends’ death and the betrayal that he couldn’t explain what happened
and say he was innocent. He simply laughed and laughed and none of them realized it was a
breakdown, the breaking point of Sirius Black.

He was only wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and it was truly amazing that despite his
pain and distress he still managed to look so good.

“You two” he said, coming to stand by Remus’ side but pointing at both Severus and Remus, “have
raised a little shit. Did you know that?”

So right after lunch Minerva went again down to the lake shore and this time the grave did develop
some cracks and her right foot ached and it was almost enough.
That idiot, that complete and utter bampot, that scabby bastard! He had gone and put Harry to hell, gone and tried to make him all alone so that he would have no one; so that wee Harry would listen only to him and he would have no one to tell him that he was loved and that him dying was a piss poor excuse of a plan. He had done all that and it was for nothing. All his suffering, raising him for the slaughterhouse, turning away those who would love him and help him. Dumbledore did all that for “the greater good” only for Harry to go and not be a horcrux.

Sirius had also gone through a sleepless night and in the morning he had gone to talk to Kreacher who was feeling better and apparently had quite a lot to say about horcruxes. Who would have thought that such a small creature would have so much knowledge inside? The most relevant information being that Harry wasn’t a horcrux. Kreacher was quite certain of that.

“Kreacher says that Draco said he would help me dunk Harry in a lake because he is a really good godson, Draco is.”

The smug way in which Severus raised his brow at Sirius’ words was absolutely unnecessary. He had been scared too, no point in denying that. He had been worried. Remus made a show of looking at his watch and yes, true, not even twenty-four hours gone and one of the two crisis had already been solved. Severus left the table to go to the Ministry to investigate wearing a soft smile with him.

(He exchanged a look with Remus, too, so full of pride and love that it felt as if everyone else were trespassing in a really intimate moment).

Honestly and Sirius and the twins still fought over who were the worst students. Potter wasn’t even here and he still managed to give her a scare.

***

The evening was gone and Snape had not returned to Hogwarts.

No one was allowed to worry. Per the Headmaster’s own code, worrying could only start at least a full day after the concerning event.

Nevertheless McGonagall waited by the balcony on the second floor that looked over the gates of the castle. The world was now the blue and grey of the twilight and she still had a headache from the long day and the sleepless night.

She felt too old and too tired. This second war had come before she got the chance of recovering from the previous one. She was not done mourning.

Lupin joined her there, although lately she thought of him less as Lupin, her student, and more like Remus the DADA teacher. It is always so strange for teachers when they see their former students being all grown up and having kids of their own. How could they have kids when it felt like it was only yesterday that she had to teach them how to properly hold a wand?

“Minerva” Remus said as he passed her a mug of hot chocolate. As soon as she took it he held his own mug with both hands, resting his arms on the balustrade.

It seemed as if during the hour of the nightfall the world decided to let loose all the remaining noise before the silence of the night. There was the usual racket as the students went back to their dorms after dinner, although students wasn’t the right word. Hogwarts now housed many people who were not students. Squibs who never got a chance to come, and muggleborns who were not allowed back, and, well, anyone who had become dangerous and undesirable in this new world. They all moved through the castle and to their beds. Wave after wave of people, it felt a bit as if Minerva and Remus
were standing with their backs to the sea while they stared at the open grounds before them. There were hoots from the owls up in the tower and a bit of wind shaking the top of the trees. The light was going out fast now and it was very hard to see the front gate.

Severus still didn’t return and they waited, side by side.

A thought came to Minerva, standing there, drinking the hot chocolate brought by this young man, this brave, brave, man who did what she should have done.

“May I ask you a question?” she spoke softly, her eyes still fixed in the darkening garden below.

“Certainly.” His eyes, too, were searching for a figure that wasn’t there.

“I can’t understand how you did it. How… without anyone noticing!”

“Taking Harry, you mean?”

“No, no, I know that. Pretty simple, really, it was Severus. Everybody suspects Severus but no one ever knows what he is really doing. That’s how you got away with it.”

There was a very telling silence coming from Remus. The world was now a dark blue and Minerva could barely make out his silhouette, although in a bit her eyes would get accustomed to the darkness and she would see better. Not enough to see if there was someone at the gates, but maybe they would notice the gleam of a spell.

“Did I ruin the surprise for him?” she said. “I am sure he would love to disclose it with great effect to leave everyone dumbfounded.”

“He does like to cause confusion, yes” Remus admitted easily. That was the thing about that boy, man now, he did not dance around lies. “Just as long as he gets to tell Moody, I think he will be happy. Minerva, if I may, how-?”

“I am not telling you my source.”

“Fair enough.” There was some quiet laughter there. What a good thing, really. Because as mature and responsible as Lupin had always been, had had to be, as tragic as his life was, he had always been possessed by a merry nature. The world didn’t let him be optimistic, that would be criminally stupid in his situation, but he was a man who knew how to laugh and Minerva was glad he got to raise Harry.

Even when he was utterly sunk in sorrow there had been something so very alive in Harry. He was someone who knew how to get joy and wonder out of life. Thank Merlin those two came together to raise him and let him be happy. Thank Merlin they foiled Dumbledore’s plan.

Maybe later she would ask Remus to tell her some stories of Harry’s childhood. She would like to hear about him being happy.

“What’s your question, then?” Remus’ mug was empty and he put it aside on the banister.

It actually didn’t have anything to do with Harry.

Here was the thing, Minerva was herself an animagus, or animaga one could say, so she was in the exclusive position to understand how difficult it was to become one. Sure, everybody knew that becoming an animagus was a difficult process, but they didn’t know the particulars. They didn’t know how much time and inconvenience it took.
Becoming an animagus was dangerous even at the best of times. There were very good reasons why it was seldom done even with expert guidance because if something went wrong the consequences were catastrophic. James had been unusually talented in Transfigurations so it was perhaps less of a surprise that he had done it, and no doubt he tutored the others, but even so they shouldn’t have been able to get away with it. There were long hours of meditation and multiple steps and more importantly you had to keep a mandrake leaf under your tongue for a whole month which was enough to drive many people crazy and cause the afore mentioned catastrophes.

And three (please let it be only three) three of her students had become unregistered animagi when they were underage, all so they could help their friend. She had to know, she had to know how they had done it and how did they manage to stop Sirius from blurring it out. She had been revising all her interactions with him at the time to see if she missed any clues.

So she asked. “How in Helga’s Hell did they become animagi?”

“Oh” Remus had a niche chuckle. “Remember the scarf incident?”

Every single person who had been in Hogwarts at the time remembered the scarf incident. Shacklebolt had come to her office and handed his resignation as seventh year prefect and she had refused with equal intensity. The scarf incident had been a fight of unseen passion and power. No one understood very well how it had started other than a mention of a borrowed and lost scarf, but she had the memory of the incident burned in her mind. Sirius Black woefully screaming and throwing himself against the Hufflepuff table, shoving everything to the floor while in the background James was on his knees dramatically tearing his shirt open and Peter took a tureen full of soup and threw it to both of them, only to miscalculate the impulse and end up hitting the Slytherin table instead.

Incident, he called it. It had been a horrible fight and Lupin had spent the next month running between the three of them as they refused to talk to each other and, oh.

“It was staged.” Remus said.

“I had to take one hundredth and fifty points from Gryffindor.” Minerva spit, because she remembered perfectly well each and every one of the instances in which a Gryffindor had costed the house a serious number of points.

“All the more reason for the other Gryffindors not to be speaking to them. The rest was just a question of using Saturday mornings wisely. The first and second years are sleeping in and everybody else always goes to Hogsmeade when it is still warm. February, on the other hand, is a horrible month to attempt anything sneaky in the dormitories.”

The moment would have been funnier and sweeter if James weren’t dead and if Sirius and Remus hadn’t gone through Azkaban and if Peter, well.

But it was a nice story nevertheless. Clever. A good story to reflect on while they waited. Better to think of that than on the reason why they were waiting. It was fully dark now. There was a bit of a yellow glow from the windows reflected on the grass below, but the rest was all black. Still, not so black that they couldn’t tell the lake from the forest and the open grounds and the path to the main gate. The full moon had been four days ago so there was still quite a lot of moonlight.

“Did Sirius talk?” asked Remus “Is that how you learned about Severus…?”

“Is it so out if this world that I would have figured it out myself?”
“Honestly? Yes. It is Severus Snape. Not even he could believe that he had stolen Harry.”

Well that was too bad because she wasn’t saying.

In Hogwarts you didn’t get the assistance you wanted or needed or deserved but what the mad forces of fortune decided to throw at you. Remus had the Weasley twins and to be honest very few people would want them helping them teach DADA. If they were being successful it was all because of Remus Lupin, Minerva was sure of it. After all he had raised Harry and she did not kid herself, she loved the wee Potter dearly, but that was one strange child.

Severus had acquired Lovegood somehow, the working theory being that she was soothed by his usual dark outfits. In true Slytherin fashion he both ignored that the girl was following him and had immediately put her at use. He had her running errands and delivering messages and to everyone’s bewilderment they seemed to work quite well together even if no one was sure how exactly they were communicating.

The point, of course, was that Minerva had gotten her own student assistant. She had been Deputy Headmistress for years and she knew how to run a school, she could do it alone and in the past she had. Nevertheless, Weasley’s input had proven quite valuable so far. Not that the boy spoke much. She had only recently noticed that he was probably the quietest member of the Weasley clan and probably the most knowledgeable if not the most studious. Of course it was easy to go unnoticed when sitting between brilliant Granger and odd Potter, but the boy had quite a brain and a big dose of talent and she was a bit embarrassed to only had realized it now.

He was also a good chess player. They met twice a week for a game and for the most part they hardly spoke. Minerva could tell he was storing many secrets, the rascal, that he didn’t share. But he did tell her about Severus because he was a properly loyal Gryffindor and Minerva needed a win.

He had known for years and he had kept quiet, but Minerva understood his silence then. It was a bit more frustrating now, when they all knew about Severus’ allegiance and still Ron only told Minerva some broad strokes of the story. He also blinked innocently and guilelessly when the girls (mostly the girls) asked him if he thought that Severus and Remus were seeing each other (there were many interested parties).

It made you wonder what else he knew. If he were in Slytherin Minerva would worry.

Still, it was late and Severus hadn’t returned. It was late and Minerva had to admit defeat in this too and go to bed. Remus stayed behind. He said he could see pretty well in the dark.

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Severus arrived in that ambiguous time when it is too late to be late night but definitely too early to be called morning. The time when it is impossible to make good decisions.

Remus was still awake and waiting for him. So was Sirius, although he had gotten a much needed nap during the afternoon once he knew that dear dear Harry would not have to go through that horcrux nonsense. What the hell. Sirius had lost and regained five years of his life in just one day and nothing that Voldemort did would ever scare Sirius as much. Nothing.

“It’s fine” called Severus when he saw them emerging from the castle’s doors. They had ran down the stairs just like when they were kids the moment they got a glimpse of him from the balcony.

“They got out.”

“Oh, thank god! Yeahahaha, Potters for the win! Gryffindor pride! Yes.”
That was all Sirius. Remus said nothing as he let him behind with just a couple of long strides so he could get to Severus first and steal a quick kiss from his lips. His hands came up to frame Severus’ face as he took his kiss. Severus was oddly shy about public affection but it was late and dark and Remus could get away with it without getting any glares.

To Remus’ surprise Severus leaned against him as they kissed and then he didn’t step back completely, the sign of a very tired Slytherin spy indeed. They were all working on little sleep.

“I don’t know much, but no one does. The Ministry is pure chaos.” He told them. Sirius had just come to them, doing a weird dance of celebration. He easily slotted himself on Severus’ other side, putting a hand on his shoulder. Unthinkable a few years ago, but not so now. Sirius could hear Severus speak better if he stayed on his side rather than Remus’, so of course he would walk next to him.

“So…” Severus paused, looking for words, and oh, dear, but he must be tired. Words were the last thing Severus ever lost before consciousness. “Pandemonium.”

So he still had at least half an hour of energy. If he had said “mess” Remus would have found him a bedroom in the first floor and carried him there in his arms.

“Everybody is pointing fingers and I hear there have been summary executions. We should prepare for a visit, I wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted to come in person and reassure himself that things are in order here, although he may be too busy to do that.”

They were now crossing the doors and coming into the castle. Quite a few ghosts were floating there in the entrance hall and they quickly turned to look at them. Remus was sure that Minerva and professor Slughorn had asked them to awake them whenever they got any news. Probably the other Heads of House too.

“And?” Sirius lightly tapped Severus with his elbow.

“I have no idea of what exactly did they do and who helped them.” Severus smiled a little while he rubbed his temples, a mixture of bewilderment and pride. He yawned. “But they got out. Plenty of witnesses saw them. The whole department has been shut down for interrogations. Two departments actually, because there was also a fire. Which reminds me, I have to tell Minerva and Filius in the morning, they will love it. Head of Propaganda, remind me.”

“I am terribly sorry to interrupt, but may we infer from your words that our beloved children are out of harm’s way?”

“That’s exactly it, Nick.” Sirius answered. Severus merely nodded while he stifled another yawn.

There was a bit of a fuss and then the ghosts quickly went on their way. The Bloody Baron nodding silently and taking his hand to the brim of his hat before vanishing through the floor.

They followed suit, taking the stairs to the third floor. Remus had given up use of the bedroom associated to the DADA office weeks ago. It seemed like a waste to have a bed go mostly unoccupied when there were so many people in the castle now. While the dormitories could always produce an extra bed, it could become a bit cramped and understandably not everybody wanted to room with children. There were also squibs who didn’t belong to a house to begin with and a few families or pairs of friends who had managed to remain together and it was just cruel to split them. Still, Remus regretted it a little bit now because there was still another corridor and two flights of stairs to the Headmaster’s quarters.
“They were looking for them in Chillington.” Severus said somewhere between the first and the second floor, while they waited for the stairs to turn to their side of the corridor. “I went to Ashbourne and let some clues in there. Returned here when I knew they had sent someone to investigate. They will waste some time at the very least, but it is not enough to throw them completely off their scent.”

“If you let us out, Moony and I can take care of that tomorrow.” Sirius said as the stairs docked on the landing. “We can visit a few pubs and drop some words, maybe even fake a sighting.”

“Yes, that would work.” And lo and behold, Severus Snape agreeing with Sirius Black.

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“Ah, Severus, you have returned. Tell me dear, how ar-?”

Severus grabbed the closest object, a book about merfolk physiology that Lovegood had left there, and threw it to the painting of Albus Dumbledore.

“I see you still don’t want to talk” said Portrait Dumbledore from a corner of the canvas. It wasn’t even his own painting. The original had been moved with no little effort to a dark corner behind a pillar where all Dumbledore could see was the grey stone of the wall. However he often abandoned his place and went to the portraits of some of the oldest headmasters, who spent all their time sleeping, and attempted to advice Severus from there.

It did not go well. After Severus took to sending flames to the paintings the lawful portrayals started to push Dumbledore out.

It was pretty obvious that Severus had no patience tonight so not only Dumbledore went back to his portrait without further interference on his part but the other Headmasters did not pretend to be deep asleep when Severus called them to give his instructions. Many of them were still a bit upset with the changes Severus had implemented, especially the open house policy, but they were bound to help the acting headmaster and that is what they did.

One of the rules of a good spy is knowing when you are too tired to be efficient so even though Severus would gladly oversee the preparations of the castle himself he understood he had to delegate. He would sleep during the morning (that was practically upon them now) and Minerva or whoever got up first could start preparing the castle for another visit.

There were no portraits in the Headmaster’s bedroom, just a picture of a landscape that went through the seasons and hence was currently dry and leaf-less. There was also a pretty nice drawing someone had made of Harry. He had been drawn with flowers in his hair and it was oddly fitting, even if the mouth wasn’t quite right.

Severus sat on the corner of the bed and closed his eyes. Remus was tired too, but less so, so he made himself useful fetching night clothes and opening the bed and while he did that he was invaded by a feeling that it was going to be all right. They were quite well informed of what was going on outside, despite the isolation of the school. They had all heard the stories of the refugees and they knew it was very bad. But tonight Remus got the feeling, the certainty, that they would win. There would still be suffering and not everyone would survive, hell, maybe not even he or Severus or Sirius would make it. But Harry would. Harry would live and he would get a world that was slightly better.

“It is going to be all right” he told Severus as he kissed him gently on the cheek, and then, because Remus was very observant he said “come to bed” which never failed to soften Severus’ eyes.
Autumn had been surprisingly dry this year, which could be considered a blessing given where they lived, but it had been quite cold to compensate. Colder now that they were in winter. Well, not winter officially, not yet, but it felt like it. It was cold and windy and people were avoiding the streets. Of course it was not just the weather that made it so. Lately any figure walking down the street became suspicious.

This one figure strutted into The Leaky Cauldron like people do when they know they are made of fashion and pretty things. He sauntered, he swaggered, one could even go as far as saying that he sashayed into the inn.

“If I may have your attention” he said to the crowd gathered. He was a very young pale man with blonde hair and a pointy face. A face nobody dared to name but that certainly got everyone’s attention.

There were many Ministry workers in the pub and a few of them were already rising from their seats and toying worriedly with their wands, unsure of the proper way to act. It was so brazen that it seemed impossible that Draco Malfoy had decided to come and request their attention. At the same time, the order to capture him had been very clear and it couldn’t be ignored. Mostly they were all hoping that someone with a higher rank and authorization made the first move.

“I would just like everyone to know that Voldemort has a small dick and smelly breath and for anyone interested I will elaborate on this in Kingston upon Hull. Thank you.”

The young Malfoy smiled, bowed, and apparated away just as the first deatheaters were coming inside, alerted by the taboo curse. There was quite a lot of confusion. Deatheaters liked to identify and apprehend culprits within fifteen seconds of arriving somewhere and since Draco Malfoy wasn’t there (ludicrous thought, how could he) it seemed like they should just arrest some of the patrons for saying the Dark Lord’s name and making up lies.

That is, until just a couple of minutes later when they felt once again the pull of the taboo on their forearms and they had to apparate to Kingston upon Hull (who would have guessed it?). A few of them remained behind to punish those who didn’t jump to capture the traitor Malfoy, because they couldn’t just apologize and go, but they didn’t stay long. Tom, the owner, served a bowl of soup, free of charge, to everyone who needed one. It was not very good soup but it was hot and just what they needed after witnessing that scene.

As announced Draco was in the square in front of the wizarding pub in Kingston upon Hull telling to anyone who cared to listen that the Dark Lord, whom he was referring by name, had an awful case of flatulence. He was standing there, smartly dressed in a dark suit that complimented him terribly well, looking all handsome and powerful and speaking the lord’s name completely unafraid. Not just that, he was being smug about it and using quite a lot of colourful adjectives. There had been talk of “gusts not unlike the ones that wreck the ships in the Northern Sea.”

In addition to the deatheaters who had first responded in The Leaky Cauldron there were others just arriving. Lamblone apparated with too much momentum and when Draco said “Voldemort” one more time the force of the taboo dragged him across the square until he was stopped by a lamp post. Draco barked a laugh, delighted, and disappeared.

You could not have people laughing at the lord’s most devoted and skilled servants. That was why the Weasley twins had earned a position (ex aequo) in the top ten list of undesirables. You could not say that.
But he did and he was now gone. They got a minute to look in confusion around themselves, fellow deatheaters and sympathisers and passers-by all looking around in case someone had an explanation. One minute, maybe two, and then they felt the taboo again and this time it took them to Barnsley where Draco Malfoy was telling to a bemused crowd mostly composed by trolls that Voldemort was afflicted with a severe case of snot-face.

This time there was close to ten deatheaters making a loose circle around him. His grey eyes shone with a spark of electricity before disappearing once more. Not only did he escape but, since they were in a circle, some of the most enthusiastic wizards managed to curse the person standing in front of them. Avery Junior deserved a special commendation for keeping up with the chase even with a nose the size and shape of a turnip.

It went on. Malfoy jumped to Henley-on-Thames or Minchimhampton or Thornbury and informed the nearest magical individual or groups of individuals that Lord Voldemort had halitosis, erectile dysfunction, knuckle-head syndrome, callous feet and fragile ankles. Occasionally he got creative and he apperated and subsequently broke the taboo curse inside a sewer, near a lake with some particularly aggressive swans, and in a grindelow infested river. He also said that the Dark Lord was affected by others, more interesting, afflictions like amenorrhea and candida vulvovaginitis which they had to look up in a book to know what they were.

Almost the full deatheater body had been mobilized and spread over the three kingdoms (apparition to Northern Ireland being impossible, of course). There had been seven injuries of varied severity and Julius Crabbe had lost his wand in the sewer. Additionally, although it had not been the primary intention, the remnants of the Order of the Phoenix used the diversion to help some refugees (muggles most of them) get out of the country and the chaos in the Ministry only developed further.

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“Today was a good day. I enjoyed myself greatly” said Sirius while he tapped his clothes with his wand. He was taller than Draco, certainly taller than the version the polyjuice had produced, and Sirius Black would not suffer ill-fitting clothes for a long time. He fixed the length of the trousers and adjusted the cuffs of the jacket.

The current Draco was closer to Sirius’ height now, but there were not many who knew that. In everyone’s minds Draco was still the Draco of the riots, the Draco of the fifth year, and he was not too different from the fourth year sample the twins had gallantly provided.

“Do I look like I care?”

“Come, now, Severinus. I know you do.” Sirius was smiling as he crossed the gate Severus had just opened for him.

“I can’t begin to fathom why you would think that.”

“Oh, dear, someone’s cranky! And I know you got some sleep this morning so there is no reason for it.” Sirius shook his head from side to side. He painted a strange picture dressed in a formal suit but still, unfairly, managed to look pretty well. Like a bad boy dressing good to go pay his respects to his old Nana, rather than as a criminal who had to present himself before a judge.

He smiled and lifted his eyebrows in delight. “Oooooh. Did I interrupt something? Were you busy Sev?”

“I am always busy and don’t call me that ever again.”
“And it’s not even dinner time! You randy man.”

“I will have no compunctions or remorse throwing you to the lake.”

“As if the giant squid would ever harm me” Sirius answered pleasantly. Roger still remembered him and waved hello with one of his tentacles when Sirius went nearby. Roger being, of course, the name James had given the Giant Squid because he thought that while Giant Squid was a good descriptor it was too impersonal. “By the way, the monster in Lochwinnoch is gone. But there were some swans in there and let me tell you they were surprisingly loud and aggressive. I had no idea they could be that way.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes: With the exception of Chillington, which I made up, every other town or city mentioned here exists and I think that is wonderful. Look at those names. Sirius probably saw some whooper swans which come to the UK in winter and are indeed quite loud. I have been terribly slow writing lately (not for lack of inspiration but lack of time) so even though I can guarantee the story will be finished soon (6-7 chapters, I think) I am worried that I may not make the weekly updates. I just want to let you know so you can plan accordingly and also reassure you that if I am not updating I am still writing! I just need a ridiculous amount of time editing.
Narcissa did not have her own rooms in the manor. She could because it was not unusual for the lords of the house to sleep in separate beds after an heir had been produced. It was classy and it gave the husband more freedom to bring his lover. But the house was not as it used to be. It had become Voldemort’s court and there were now many people living in there, a constant traffic of visitors coming and going.

The main bedroom had been surrendered to Voldemort. Lucius’ idea. They had taken the second best. Bella and her husband were occupying another one and of course Rabastan needed his own. The Averys were always coming and going as were the Mulciber brothers and their mother. That was it. The manor was big but it did not have that many bedrooms. It was about having big rooms and an impressive collection of books and artifacts.

There was a bedroom that remained locked and unused and Narcissa never dared going there not matter how much she wished to. She could not afford being caught there but at least she could make sure it was not occupied by anyone else.

At the moment she was in the room she shared with Lucius. The wife’s room. She wished she could have it all to herself but it wasn’t too bad. Lucius was desperate to regain the lost favor and throwing himself into the Dark Lord’s service. He was out most of the time and spent many nights in the hotel in London. Even when he came to the manor he hardly touched her which was a blessing because she could not stand his touch anymore.

He had slept with her the night after the White Hare battle, when he had successfully protected the foreign delegation and injured Kingsley Shacklebolt (presumed dead now). Narcissa had endured and then he had been gone for the next two weeks.

He was gone now, too. Everybody was gone and Narcissa was the single habitant of the house. She hadn’t been alone in the manor in years! Probably since the Triwizard Tournament, when Draco was still in school and Lucius still took those trips to the city and neither Bella nor Voldemort had come to take the house from them.

She was completely alone. Even the house-elves were gone. One outside, cleaning the garden off dry leaves, the other attending to the peacocks.

Narcissa could spare a few minutes to go to the bedroom that remained locked. If she opened and closed the door quickly, she would hardly disturb the air in the room.

It was full of dust.

She didn’t touch anything so she wouldn’t leave obvious marks. There was a thin grey layer over the desk and the things there. A few books, a few pieces of parchment with drawings in the corners. The bed was just as it was and she lifted the blankets carefully coming to her knees so she could inhale
the faint aroma that she believed was still in the sheets.

He smelled so well. She didn’t know how to call it, but he had always smelled like something clean and crisp, like something that belonged to the sun and the sky. Her son smelled like the wind after the rain.

And they were all out there chasing him. Narcissa was alone because they were all out there hunting her little boy.

She felt the vomit come up and she left the room quickly. She didn’t want to spoil the aroma, the invisible traces that still remained of Draco. She threw up on the corridor and stayed there for long minutes on her hands and knees, retching and throwing little more than spite and bile.

She murmured *evanesco* and the stain was gone. But the acrid smell remained in her mouth and her hair and that horrible burning sensation from her stomach went up her chest and to her mouth and eyes. What could she do? She could do nothing, not even hope. She could do nothing but wait. Wait and see what news they brought.

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“I don’t want to sound impatient” whispered Hermione. “But isn’t this taking too long? You would think they would take more of an interest.”

She had acquired a sweater. It was white, with two blue and red stripes on the neck and the sleeves. White was hardly the best colour to wear when you are on the run and she had said so, but Draco was very insistent that it was her colour and in any case it was wool and very warm. She played with the cuff. The sleeves were a bit too long.

“I really don’t know what could be keeping them” Draco whispered back. They had casted *muffliato* around them but they were not taking any chances. The plan was already risky enough as it was. Absurdly risky, but Hermione was dead certain that it would work, just as Harry had known they wouldn’t be recognized in the Ministry and Draco had known where to look for an exit.

Hermione wasn’t very good with emotions, hers or anyone else’s. She had always exhibited more awareness than Ron, it’s true, but that was more due to Ron having a philosophical acceptance of life than to any particular sensitivity on Hermione’s part. She was not very good with emotions because emotions clouded judgement and Hermione put all her might in her razor sharp mind. This is something that she understood very well. This is why that morning, after breakfast, she had unfolded a piece of parchment on the table (sadly there were only two notebooks in the house and they were mostly full) and had announced, with great assuredness, that Voldemort must had been and still be very scared.

That was the gist of it. After the duel and escape from Grimmauld Place, after seeing every person he ever killed come back to face him, the man who used to be Tom Riddle had to be scared. Scared of Harry Potter and his crazy powers, scared of his inability to defeat that strange boy, scared of himself failing and of death finally catching up to him.

Scared people don’t think straight.

The current state of the Ministry wouldn’t help either. Not only because he had lost two heads of department, but because it was in disarray and most importantly because it showed that his control over it wasn’t as tight as he wanted everyone to believe. The three of them had just escaped with their lives and their wands, they hadn’t won anything (other than a small brownie) but it had been a victory nonetheless. Voldemort had to be angry and worried and in desperate need for a big symbolic
Angry people don’t think straight.

Worried people don’t think straight.

People in desperate need for a win are rarely thinking at all.

All these led Hermione to believe that he could be manipulated into revealing the nature and location of the elusive third horcrux, (the other two being the snake and whatever it was he had most certainly hidden in Hogwarts).

“It will probably be a historical relic” Harry had looked down at the list they had quickly rewritten from memory. “Helga Hufflepuff had a cup, Rowena Ravenclaw a diadem and a hand mirror. Slytherin had the locket, which we already got, and a quill that was probably lost in some goblin war. Then there is Godric’s girdle.”

“That is not a thing.” Hermione had said quickly. She knew because she actually paid attention eighty per cent of the time in History of Magic class. Draco only listened around forty per cent to get an idea of what they were covering and studied the subject on his own. Apparently the notes he made were legendary and jealously sought.

“No?” Harry had blinked, perplexed.

“No, Harry, it’s just an expression.” Draco had said, and because he had a ridiculous crush he had sounded sweet and fond rather than irritated and personally offended. His rants over historical mistakes were also legendary. There had been one time in second year when Theodore Nott had purposely mixed Nagut the Destroyer with Gladut the Fire-breaker out of boredom. The tantrum didn’t reach Snape but the prefects did take Nott aside and gave him a long speech about deliberately reeling up Slytherins who shared bedrooms, bathrooms, study rooms and dining tables with them and where also in the Quidditch team and had been talking about the cultural and economic differences between goblins and giants nonstop for the last fifteen hours. From then on, Nott limited himself to Ravenclaws who were very good targets and kept their frenzies to their common room and at most the library.

Draco smiled as he ruffled Harry’s hair and kissed him in the cheek. “Like Merlin’s pants” he said “Godric Gryffindor had a sword.”

“And the hat. The Sorting Hat.” Hermione had added.

“He might have had a girdle too.”

“Harry, do you even know what a girdle is?” Hermione had asked slowly in her Prefect tone. A dangerous tone designed to create a false sense of security. George had accidentally confessed to the existence of the skivving snackboxes because of it. He just couldn’t help bragging in front of her.

Harry had paused to think about it. “It’s something you wear, isn’t it?”

“Yes, to tuck the belly and make a slimmer waist.”

“He might have been wearing one, if he was concerned with physical appearance.”

“It would not be common knowledge” Draco had noted. He knew his father had worn one on occasion when he wanted to particularly dress to impress. So did Nott’s father (no clue about the son).
Regardless, it didn’t matter so much what it was. They were all pretty certain they could recognize a horcrux by now. It was the where it was that eluded them.

“You are absolutely certain that they sent a letter?” Asked Draco now, looking down.

“Yes, sir” answered the house-elf. Mirpy was her name. “And the young mistress came half an hour ago and told Mirpy to light the fire in the library so she could go to the Ministry herself.”

“Well then I don’t know what to say.” Draco sounded amusingly miffed. Like a rich person peeved by the discovery that their highly exclusive club was now accepting unsuitable candidates like women or foreigners.

You would think that they would be more diligent. They were talking about the Undesirable number one.

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The plan, as first presented by Hermione, was extremely simple: Make Voldemort believe that they were preparing to destroy the horcrux. Not a horcrux but the horcrux, the one whose whereabouts they wanted to learn about. Phase two, wait and see what he said.

Of course this plan entailed some negative consequences, like Voldemort upgrading his security measures. But there was nothing comparable to not knowing where to go, so whatever new curse he casted, whatever monster he added to the dungeon, they would get around it.

There was also the possibility of them tipping him off without actually learning anything, if only he kept quiet about his fears. But that’s why they had to act now. Both Hermione and Harry still had scratches from the splintered wood of the door and bruises from when they were thrown back as said door blew up. The panic and the chaos was still very recent and he had to be scared. They just had to dress it right.

Funnily, it was Harry the one who came up with the general idea of how to play it while Draco provided the details. Voldemort might suspect a chance encounter or another break of the taboo, but he would accept a betrayal. If Harry were to confide in someone and that someone were to tell Voldemort nobody would question it.

So they had to find themselves some nice people that would betray them and sell them to Voldemort. Someone in which Harry could reasonably trust and expect their help. Gryffindor would be ideal.

There was, of course, the part where Harry had to face and escape Voldemort again, and someone had to stay behind and listen, and they couldn’t say too much right away or Voldemort would protect the horcrux before coming for Harry. They had to make him come to where they were and then, when he asked the traitor, hope that he would puzzle out what Harry was supposed to be doing and subsequently let them know what were they supposed to be doing.

All this, however, took hardly thirty minutes of planning.

The real obstacle was finding adequate traitors and figuring out a good spot from which they could listen. Honestly, it was absurdly difficult.

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“I am learning a lot about people” Harry said. Mostly he was learning that people were wildly unpredictable and very complex.
For example, there were perfectly horrible people, people who made Harry grit his teeth, like the Longbottoms, who would nevertheless lay their lives to save Harry Potter. And then there was wholesome and nice people, like the Davies, who liked sports and looked healthy and were polite and yet they had a statue of a wizard stepping over a muggle in their front garden.

(Harry’s dislike of the Longbottoms came as a surprise to both Hermione and Draco. It was particularly intense and it made Harry so angry he could not speak. All he could say about the topic was that they were not good people. Neville was. Neville was great and Harry loved him which explained why he disliked the rest of his family so much).

The Davies were much nicer and Harry remembered Roger Davies, Ravenclaw Keeper, fondly. They would had been a perfect choice and it would had been quite understandable if Harry were to ask for their help if only they hadn’t put a sign saying KEEP THE LINE CLEAN in their living room window.

Harry was notoriously absent minded, but pretending he hadn’t noticed that might be a bit of a stretch.

They were debating the merits of trying a certain Gertha Ollivander (sister or cousin of the wandmaker, Draco wasn’t sure), based on the fact that the Ollivander was a pureblooded family and the three of them agreed that Garrick Ollivander was weird and a bit sinister. They were going to check out the surroundings of the house when Draco stopped suddenly and stared down the street.

He stood there for a whole minute with a look of deep thought about him. They said nothing. Harry took slow even breaths and rolled his shoulders a little bit and focused on the glamour charm shielding them. The streets were quite empty so they felt that even with the glamour they were bringing attention to themselves just by being there. Hermione had her wand ready and their back to them, carefully looking around for any potential threat.

“Them.” Said Draco as he started walking down the street. He stopped again when the street became wider, taking a small step back so they wouldn’t be so in the open. The building behind them was casting a small shadow and it felt appropriate to stand in it. But it was also kind of cold so I felt even more appropriate to take any sunrays they could get. They had made some cloaks with the Ministry robes from yesterday, but they had come a bit short (just about waist length) and they were not too warm.

“Which house are we looking at?” asked Harry. He had both his hands under his armpits to keep them warm.

“That one. The brick one with white and red shutters.”

“It’s nice.”

“That is the Bones’ house.”

“Susan’s family? Weren’t they all in the Ministry?” asked Hermione in a whisper.

“Her aunt was in the Wizengamot” answered Harry, happy to be able to answer this kind of question for once. “Saw her there in the fifth year” he frowned a bit trying to remember “I think I might have fought her on my first year. Susan, I mean, not the aunt. And the second year too. She acted like she knew everything just because her family worked there. Ron called her a troll-head for me and McGonagall barely took any points for it.”

Hermione shrugged. “So are we trying them?” she asked.
Ernie’s family were also well positioned in the Ministry and he always spoke as if he were the Minister’s confidante. There was a very obvious parallel. Besides, Susan was one of those girls with a perpetual air of sadness and Hermione found it very irritating even if she understood that Susan couldn’t help the way her eyes and brows were set.

“No.” Said Draco simply. He turned to look at them. “The Bones are Dumbledore loyalist and Amelia Bones has been presumed dead for weeks. Really, weren’t we reading the same newspaper?”

Obviously not. Draco had an unfair advantage, he knew all the names and who was married to whom.

“She apologized to me for the things she had said about my dad” whispered Harry “and I think she apologized to Neville too.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Draco was back to looking intently at the house. “That is the Bones’ residence, but the man that just went inside was not Petronius Bones.”

“Maybe he was a visitor.”

“With his own key? I don’t think so. That is a new family living in the Bones’ house.”

They knew what it meant. This wasn’t something that made it to The Prophet but after yesterday’s visit to the Ministry they knew and they understood. It was the people who didn’t believe in the nightmare that Voldemort offered but who thrived under it. People who, as they saw the world burn, would stand to the side hoping to cook some sausages for free and whistling to drown out the screams of those burning.

“So who was it?” Asked Harry from the hedgerow of the house’ back garden.

“I am not completely sure” whispered Draco also from the hedgerow and standing on tiptoe to get a better look. “But he looked like a Diggory.”

“He WHAT!” Hermione, who was on look-out, turned around to stare as if Draco had said that he had seen Minerva McGonagall doing cartwheels in the garden.

“Oh, hush. Not those idealist nature lovers from the Hufflepuff branch. I meant one of the elder brothers.”

“Cedric is an only child.”

“Nobody is talking about Cedric, Harry. He is a Hufflepuff and the son of a third child, being selected for the Triwizard Tournament is the most interesting thing that will ever happen to him. Why do you think most of Slytherin was supporting Krum? He was already a professional player. His social capital was astounding!”

“You didn’t know about those things then.”

“We didn’t know the name, but we were all well aware of the importance of social relations and alliances, and your friend Cedric was not well positioned. His uncles, on the other hand…”

Ravenclaws both of them. They had carved good positions for themselves, one in the department of International Relations and the other in a lawyer’s office in Diagon Alley. They did not claim to be pureblooded because it hadn’t occurred to them before, and it didn’t offer an obvious advantage as it did now.
They did not want to get excited but it looked as if they had found their Pettigrew.

There was a small wooden door in the hedge and from what they could see between the leaves and the planks of the door, the yard was empty. Draco said that the door would probably be rigged with an alarm if they tried *alohomora* but Harry thought that they could open it if they levitated the hatch from the other side, which was very clever. It worked, but it took them over ten minutes and multiple attempts and in the end only Hermione had enough patience to keep trying.

The door swung open silently. They were holding their breath. Now it was just a question of finding a way to sneak inside the house and leave an exit open and then Harry could circle back and knock in the front door to start the charade and-

There was a pair of big blue eyes staring at them. The owner was so short that they hadn’t seen him before.

Here they were, the Boy Who Lived, the Boy Who Broke His Wand and the Brightest Witch of Their Generation frozen in place by a pair of serene blue eyes.

“Mirpy!” called a woman’s voice in an impatient tone. Their eyes went from the short figure standing before them to the open door to the house in the background.

“Yes, miss!” answered the figure. Mirpy. A house-elf. Probably female now that they looked better at her, although you could never know for sure, the way they were dressed in rags.

“My shoes and cloak are full of mud, clean them.” The voice spoke quickly and animatedly, but it had some quality that Harry couldn’t identify and that it made his skin crawl. “And I won’t need the green dress after all, put it back. Is there someone at the backdoor? I think I felt the crying violas humming.”

“Ask me for food” whispered the elf, still staring straight at them. In fact her eyes hadn’t moved at all.

Hermione was the first to speak. “Umm, could I have some food? Please?” She had her wand gripped tight and her left hand was already coming to grab Harry by the neck of his jumper.

The elf did something with her eyebrows to indicate this was not enough.

“Can I have something to eat?” tried Harry.

“It’s just some mudbloods begging for scraps, miss” the elf screamed back, her eyes still on them like an invisible force keeping them on the spot.

“Well send them out” said the voice from inside. She went on to say it was not their problem if they were hungry and that people should be ashamed to go and sully a good house’ reputation like theirs. Then she gave some more domestic orders to the house-elf before getting out of hearing. Still, Harry couldn’t shake the feeling that he knew that voice even though he also believed he had never heard it before.

“Would you be so kind to step out, please?” Said the elf. She had grey skin and ragged and tattered clothes of different colours that didn’t look like much against the cold despite how many layers she was wearing. There was also something about her that reminded them of Luna Lovegood. Here she was, small and fragile and barefoot and looking very calm and self-possessed.

They stepped back and let the door swung close. Their hearts were beating madly and Harry’s palms had begun to sweat. They still didn’t know whether to count themselves lucky or not.
“Is there anyway Mirpy could be of assistance?”

She could maybe not appear behind them without so much as a “poof”, yes. That would be a good thing for their continued health.

“It would be and honour and a pleasure, sirs, madam.” Mirpy said and for the first time there was something a little bit like enthusiasm in her otherwise perfectly calm and emotionless voice.

They stared.

Never one to be let speechless for long Draco asked whether it was the Diggorys living there after all. It was. Diggory from International Relations plus his wife and daughter who, as luck would have it, was a Gryffindor, although she had left Hogwarts before Harry’s arrival. Mirpy also informed them that she didn’t think this was a good place for them which was exactly what they wanted to hear.

Mirpy was an elf with ideas.

“I realize this may not be the moment” said Hermione “But have you heard of the S.P.E.W? It is part of the Platform for Race, Blood and Species Equality now. There is help if you need it.”

Look, the elf was barefoot and they were in winter. Hermione might have learned to frame her speech better, thanks to Sudabar, but she would not let pass the opportunity to help.

“Oh, Mirpy is not allowed to read any of that rubbish, miss” said the elf gently shaking her head. “Mistress expressively forbid it.”

Of course she had. Harry looked back to the house. They could only see the windows on the second floor from where they were standing. Harry could not imagine a bigger punishment than being forbidden to read, and he had actually been tortured both by Voldemort and Umbridge.

“Mirpy is not forbidden from listening to it, though” she went on, still with that pleasant tone of the house-elves. That was the thing about them, they could speak of the most horrible things and they would make it sound as if they were talking about the quality of the linen. “Buggy from the Longbottoms told Mirpy all about it, and Master Cedric said a lot too, back when he could still come to the house.”

Master Cedric had been very busy. Master Cedric had received a letter from a certain Slytherin prefect telling him about “rising awareness” and “positive portrayal in media” and how he had just the right chin for the job. It might be that Draco were wrong about Cedric’s prospects in life because Master Cedric had been quite unashamedly using his good looks and his voice to whisper words here and there and he hadn’t let things like being disowned and exiled stop him.

They said that house-elves liked serving and that they obeyed mindlessly but this was not Harry’s experience. Of all the house-elves he had met only Winky, Barty Coruch’s elf, had seemed truly subservient. Dobby helped Harry and tried to warn him of Lucius’ plan. He punished himself for it, which was horrible, but the important thing here was that Dobby did something for himself even if he was later compelled to hurting himself for it. Kreacher too never let an opportunity pass to express his true feelings even while he kept a deferential appearance. He showed quite a lot of cheek and Harry loved it, even if he was often the one at which the disrespect was directed.

Poor Kreacher. He hoped he had made it to Hogwarts well.

Now house-elves barely got any education and of course they would never attend Hogwarts as students (the school was for pure humans only, Flitwick and Hagrid and Remus had had a lot of
trouble getting in). But if they were to attend and if they were to be sorted there was absolutely no
doubt that Mirpy here would be a Slytherin. The Sorting Hat would be yelling the answer as soon as
she got to the Great Hall.

Mirpy did not like the idea of either of them hanging near the house but it took her ten seconds flat to
figure out that if they were still there it was because they wanted something despite the danger.
Certainly she could not reveal her master’s secrets or steal one of their possessions, but there was no
rule against inviting people inside, specially someone as popular in the Ministry as them, and friends
of Master Cedric! They had forbidden him to return but, funnily, they had said nothing of the people
associated with him.

Which is to explain why Hermione and Draco were currently sitting in the Diggory’s kitchen
eavesdropping on Harry’s conversation with Mrs. Diggory.

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Had Sirius been there, he would had been so proud of Harry.

“Ah, good afternoon, sir. Sorry for coming here uninvited” he had said as Leon Diggory came to the
lobby with his eyes bugging out to find that Mirpy had been perfectly accurate as to who was
waiting in the entrance. “My name is Harry Potter. You may know me as The Boy Who Lived. Is
this a bad time?”

Of course it wasn’t. Regardless of allegiance and ideology if Harry Potter came to your house you
invited him in and gave him tea. He simply was not the kind of person who could be ignored or
dismissed.

Their manners might had failed a little bit, due to the shock, but Potter certainly didn’t comment on it.
How could he? He had been raised by a werewolf after all. The fact that he had introduced himself
politely was nothing short of a miracle.

They went to the living room and while the wife, Ida, served him a cup of tea herself, Harry
explained that he needed to borrow a staff of broken willow, if they had any, so he could perform a
ritual that would destroy an object that, as he understood it, was very important for lord Vold, woops,
excuse him there, ahaha, so sorry. But they knew who he meant. Anyway, did they have something
like what he was describing? It was very important. He could wait.

Even before he was done explaining the Diggorys had already scrambled to send a note to the
Ministry. This! This was going to give them all they ever wanted. This would erase them not being
Slytherins or part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight and even all the nonsense of their nephew Cedric. The
Dark Lord would reward them handsomely. Leon would be promoted, no doubt, and Edith would
make a good marriage and they would get a new house. A manor, this time.

Only he wasn’t coming. They had sent word that Harry Potter, undesirable number 1, was at their
house and lord Voldemort wasn’t coming. Not him nor anyone else. They had sent an owl saying
that Harry Potter was at their house and apparently no one was interested.

That… that simply made no sense.

Thankfully Leon had exhibited some quick thinking and said that they did possess a couple of
broken willow branches just as the ones Harry had described. He would go to retrieve them
presently, if Potter could show some patience and wait here? This should do to keep him in place.
There was no reason to worry just yet, it had only been twenty minutes after all. Perhaps the message
was taking a bit longer in reaching the Dark Lord. That way perhaps Leon could be there to greet
him when he came. It was always important to get people to know your face. Ida and Edith would make sure that Potter didn’t go anywhere.

Only that had been hours ago and still nothing.

Ida was beside herself with nerves. For the most part Potter was happy to stay there and make conversation (he couldn’t tell much about his mission, only that there was something of Voldemort’s he needed to retrieve), but twice already he had awkwardly remarked that it was taking quite a long time for Leon to return. Fortunately their daughter Edith rose to the occasion and said that indeed it was taking quite long, but you know how it is with old houses like theirs, it is almost impossible to find anything. She would go now and help Papa look.

She had given her mother a meaningful look as she left the room. Ida had taken comfort from it but she was also growing more and more anxious. She did not know what she would do if Potter decided to leave. Stop him, of course. Stupefy should do it since everybody knew the boy was little more than a squib. But still, Ida was terrified that something would happen and he would get away. He was known for that too. Harry Potter: refused to die, kept disappearing.

“This room is lovely” he said. “I like the curtains.”

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It would fair and accurate to say that everyone in the house was having a terrible time. Even Mirpy, and she had been quite happy to have the opportunity to help Hermione Granger (and Harry and Draco, of course, but there was an obvious preference).

Leon Diggory was currently hiding in his own cellar quietly building a holding cell where they could put Potter if he tried to leave the house. He was sure that they could stop him if that were the case because the boy hardly deserved to be called a wizard. To think that he had competed against his nephew, really… What an insult. That was all Dumbledore, you know, pushing this sad excuse of a halfblood wizard into the tournament. But the boy was almost feral, everybody knew that, so Leon would feel better if they put him behind bars so the women of the house would not have to be afraid of him.

 Conjuring the iron bars and drilling them in the stone was proving harder than expected. Leon’s feet and hands and nose were cold from his long stay there and he was not having a good time. So far this sudden strike of good fortune had brought him a lot of trouble, a headache and a principle of a cold, although of course he was still far from thinking that. He just wished that someone would answer his call soon.

Ida Diggory was not having a better time, even though she was sitting in her living room drinking tea. It was her second cup and she was taking very small sips so it wouldn’t look like they had been sitting there so long. Potter was still with his first cup, which he had barely touched. All her energy was directed to Potter, to being pleasant and keeping him there and smiling and nodding along to his bumbling explanation. It was exhausting. She felt as if she had ran for miles when she hadn’t moved from her chair in hours. She wished she had put a sleeping draught in the tea, but it was too late now. She didn’t dare excusing herself from the room even for a second lest she were to return and find Potter gone.

Even Harry was a bit uncomfortable. He knew perfectly well what was happening in the house, he knew what he was waiting for, and this long wait was throwing him off-balance. Mostly it was the obvious distress of Mrs. Diggory that was enhancing his own anxiety. She probably hadn’t noticed but she had ruined the skirts of her dress with how tight she was grabbing the fabric. Plus, even though she was trying to be a nice host and she actually had pretty good manners, there was
something about her unerringly similar to Petunia Dursley and it made sitting there with her all the more intolerable. It was the way she spoke. Harry couldn’t take it.

Meanwhile Draco and Hermione were equally worried about the long wait, but they were also in the kitchen drinking tea and eating Mirpy’s fabulous raspberry scones so they really couldn’t complain. It had been three hours now since Harry knocked on the door, and thirty minutes since the daughter flooed to the Ministry. The sun had set and there was something oddly upsetting about the nightfall coming while they were hiding in an enemy’s house.

For her part Edith Diggory was not having a better time even though she was not at the house. In fact, she was having the worst time of all. She had reached the Ministry and not only she hadn’t found anyone who could take her message, she was receiving quite a lot of questions about her arrival. Even once she managed to get rid of the pesky inspectors in the Atrium, she found that the building barely held any Aurors or Special Operators. All numbers had been called to attend others matters, it seemed. They spoke of some truly amazing event at The Leaky Cauldron.

Of course they had no way to know that currently all the deatheater body, minus one, was investigating the sudden apparitions of Draco Malfoy and his tour of the country. Everyone else, special operators and simple Ministry officials with no power of arrest, were busy getting the Ministry back to order. There was a new Head of Security who still barely knew how to get to his office or who were his employees. They had lost years of work in the Registration and Identification fire, which meant they now didn’t know who were they supposed to arrest next. And there was a silent but well grounded panic seizing everyone after the realization that there was a Morality and Pureblood Spirit Department no one knew about, which obviously meant that all of their workers were undercover and could be standing right next to you.

As Severus had said: It was pandemonium.

Definitely not the time for people to be checking the mail.

Other than the deatheaters stationed in strategic places, like Snape and the Carrows, everyone else was making him or herself useful. Even Rodolphus Lestrange had been shaken awake from his usual half dead stupor and sent to help with the Draco hunt. Even people that were considered inferior, like the werewolves, were brought to help. Hell they said that if they managed to capture Draco they would be rewarded with the morsmorde brand in their arm. Them, half-breeds, carrying the most sacred brand!

The only exception, the only person not fallen to the current madness, was Bellatrix Lestrange. After all, she had experience with insanity. She knew how to live and function with it.

She also knew a diversion when she saw one.

You see, Bella, as much as it pained people to admit, was intelligent. Bella could not help noticing that Draco Malfoy suddenly seemed to have a wand when he had broken his and not only was he apparating, despite not having received any lessons, but he was not raising any alarms for unlicensed apparition.

Bella could see quite clearly that it was not Draco.

It had been a very convincing portrayal of Draco Malfoy. Effortlessly elegant and driven by a special kind of internal energy, but it was not him. Given that the rotten traitor boy and the mudblood girl and the abomination had been hiding in the ancestral sitting of the Black family, it was no effort to imagine who was behind the impersonation.
The house should have been Bella’s. When Sirius showed his disloyalty and Regulus got himself killed, it should have gone to her. But she was a woman with no male heir and so her claim had nothing to do against either Sirius’ or Draco’s.

Some days Bella whished she could stick a knife in her sister’s womb and make her barren as she was, make her pay with her blood for all the dishonour she had brought upon them. Make her pay for the insult that was to Bella to be able to conceive and have a son, a boy, and ruin him. If Bella had a son of her own, or even a girl… She would have made him the best and most devoted servant of the Dark Lord. She would have offered him her son in sacrifice if he required it. She… Maybe she would have conceived by him and then she wouldn’t be giving him her son but his son.

But of course, no. Bella didn’t get to be a mother and she didn’t get to have the house. All the things that were rightfully hers, they went to others and they were undeserving and they ruined them.

She was not participating in the Draco hunt. There was no point. She knew Sirius. He would laugh like a fool as he strung them along, but he would not stay long enough to actually face any of them in combat. Such Gryffindor he was, but he would not duel against them.

She would kill him. When the time came, Bella would kill Sirius Black. She would kill that filthy little girl, Hermione Granger. She would kill Draco if Lucius didn’t do it.

(She would kill Snape the moment he showed his true face.)

But now was not the time. She had tried to warn the others and of course they had ignored her. Perhaps it was right for them to do so. They had their orders, from McNair and the Minister and from the Dark Lord himself. They should not question them.

It was up to Bella, then, to figure out what it was that her dear cousin didn’t want her to see. Let him run and dance and laugh as everyone else played into his game and followed his trail. His diversion would also be Bella’s. While he was busy running from them she would find that half-breed he called his friend and she would find whatever burrow they were hiding in and she would have a party of her own.

“Oh, Madam! Madam!”

There was a girl screaming and waving while two idiots tried to push her away from the Auror office. Bella had been left alone with the clerks. Everyone who could present combat was gone.

“Madam, please!”

Bellatrix stared coldly and uncaring as they grabbed the girl’s arms and dragged her outside. It was not uncommon for someone to send the eldest or youngest relative begging for something. If McNair had been here the girl would had gotten an audience.

“Don’t you touch me! How dare you touch me? Madam! Listen to me.”

The girl was certainly more spirited than most. She elbowed idiot number one (Bella didn’t know his name, it was the one with the teeth) and of course he released her to touch his nose. The girl twisted away from the idiot number two and crossed the room quickly to where Bella was sitting, legs up in the desk.

Today she was at what used to be Mad-eye Moody’s desk. Sadly she did not know which ones used to be the Longbottom’s.

“Oh, Madam” she said, falling to her knees. It was quite good. She had the right intonation and her
dressed folded beautifully as she kneeled. Most people tripped with the hem.

“Get up, girl, and leave. That was well done, a good attempt, so I won’t ask you your name. Know that that is a present.” Bella’s attention was already back to the map in the opposite wall where a red dot came up whenever there was a breach of the taboo. A blue light should come with an unlicensed apparition and so far she hadn’t seen a single one of them.

“No, Madam, you must listen to me!”

Well, the girl was brave, she would give her that. Stupid, too. Most people understood that Bellatrix Lestrange not knowing your name is a very good thing if you has just annoyed her.

Bellatrix glowered down at her, pinning her in place, and to her surprise the girl looked back. You had to be very, very, brave to look Bellatrix Lestrange in the eye. This was not something that stupid people dared to do.

Edith Diggory was a Gryffindor. She would brave any obstacle to deliver her message.

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Bella had seen through the diversion and she had learned some self-control, but she still had to work on that aspect.

The fireplace in the living room was not lighted, otherwise she would have gone directly to that room. As it was, she came running out of the fireplace in the Diggory’s library and left the room without sparing a second for thought. She did not know the lay of the house but she did not let that stop her.

“What’s this, Mrs. Diggory?” said Harry calmly over the resounding steps coming down the stairs. Why no one suspected Severus’ involvement in his education remained a mystery. “Have you perchance another visitor? I shall make my excuses then.”

That said, because Harry still didn’t know how to apparate nor should he try without adult supervision, he simply opened the window and jumped out of there.

It was a ridiculous thing to do. Mrs Diggory should be excused for not rising sooner to stop him. No one would expect anyone to exit through a window.

Bellatrix Lestrange got to see as Harry got up from the crouch he had fallen into after the jump. She casted a curse quickly and instinctively which Harry ducked without problems since he only had to step away from the window. By the time Bellatrix had reached said window and peered out of it there was no sign of Harry. No sign at all.

He could not apparate, she knew he could not, so they wasted precious time looking around the garden and down the street while Harry settled quietly in the kitchen. House-elf apparition. No one ever remembered it. Harry was a fan. It was less upsetting than side-apparition with an adult wizard too.

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The kitchen was a fair distance away from the living room yet they could hear perfectly well everything that was going on. Mostly it was Bellatrix expressing her dissatisfaction with the universe.

Leon Diggory currently wished he had stayed in the cellar. Bellatrix had not been happy to see him and had blamed him for Potter’s escape even though he hadn’t been in the room. Apparently he should had been just as he should have made sure that the message was delivered earlier rather than
had to send his daughter. There were many accusations of lacking proper wizarding temperament and some threats of castration since he seemed happy to act like an ox.

“Perhaps it’s not too late” said Edith, who could see that his father was just one bad look away from being permanently maimed. “He spoke of needing to go somewhere, didn’t he mother? You sat with him more time.”

“Yes!” Ida rushed to say. She would like for her husband to remain intact, even if she didn’t appreciate how quick he had been to blame her. “Yes, he came here asking for a branch of broken willow. He wanted, oh, he wanted to steal something from the Dark Lord, something important, he said.”

This was it. They were finally on the topic. Only they wanted to overhear Voldemort’s reaction, not Bella’s, because they knew Voldemort hadn’t exactly advertised the nature of the horcruxes. Lucius certainly hadn’t known or he wouldn’t have risked it like that. He believed it was a powerful enchanted dark object that perhaps held some sentimental value. Of course, he could be excused for not thinking that it had a piece of Voldemort’s soul. This was not a thought that came often in life.

“STEAL SOMETHING!?” Bella’s voice carried through the house like an electric shock. Her voice was like a toothache.

“A va-valued possession of th- the- Dark Lord” came Ida’s quibbering voice, still sounding quite a lot like Petunia.

Harry had the sensation that maybe Bella knew what they were talking about. Only he realized he could not really listen to it because Hermione was leaning against a wall, her hands coming to her knees just like when someone is light-headed.

Hermione was a pretty healthy girl. Perhaps not like Ginny who seemed to be made of iron and stone and was very athletic, but he had never seen Hermione get sick. She did not get colds and she never complained of any pain.

Her chest and shoulders heaved and Hermione opened her mouth to throw up.

Draco turned to look at them and Harry waved at him with his left hand. It was just a mad flail of his fingers trying to tell him that he should pay attention and learn all he could about the horcrux and maybe memorize whatever Bellatrix said word for word. Of course Harry was listening too, but he was not paying attention anymore. Instead he was grabbing Hermione’s arms and pressing gently until she made eye contact with him.

She was pale and looked like she had trouble breathing. Worst of all was the way she was looking at Harry, as if she had no idea of who he was and where they were.

It was all Bella. They had been prepared for Voldemort himself but Bella’s presence was… no good. It was a terrible thing to say because Voldemort was a monster and a very powerful wizard and his eyes were red, red! But Harry preferred him to Bella. There was something about that woman, some hidden quality, that felt like a razor dragging down your back. Voldemort was horrible but in the same way that facing an angry tiger or a crocodile was horrible. He did not have that component that made you feel like you were facing that tiger in the dark and naked.

Bella had tortured Hermione and now they were listening to her making some horrible threats. Hermione was quiet but she had tears in her eyes and she had begun to sweat.

“You are not alone” whispered Harry, his hands still grabbing her forearms. He didn’t want to speak
“Can Mirpy help in anyway?”

“No. Yes. Stay with Draco and pay attention.”

“SAY ALL YOU KNOW! Clear and loud or I swear I will cut your tongue!”

“Ssssh” Harry helped Hermione to the floor so she wouldn’t have very far to go if she fainted. She looked as if she had already fainted in a way. Her body was upright and her eyes open, but she did not look conscious in the least. She looked as if she were very far away and in pain.

They all dealt with their traumas in their own way. For Harry it was difficult sleep that only got better if he had someone by his side, and it was mostly about his fear of other people being hurt. He had never had nightmares about Voldemort or Umbridge torturing him, but he had plenty in which he went dark (although his skin actually became iridescent white in the dream) and he tortured the people he loved. Draco didn’t have nightmares or crisis but sometimes the smallest things could bring him to tears. Usually good things, things that perhaps he was experiencing for the first time without being afraid. He had looked really choked up when Sirius offered to teach him how to shave. (Not that there had been much to shave at the time).

Hermione had been mostly nightmare free and even if she had had some episodes when she remembered and the memories seemed to take over her, it had never been something as debilitating and paralyzing as this. Whenever they went outside in the horcrux hunt and even when Voldemort himself came to their door she had been calm and efficient and wonderful just like she always was.

“I will beat you with your own bones!”

Now she was on the floor and she couldn’t breath and Harry could feel her pulse racing and jumping like a mad animal running towards a cliff and he had no idea of what to do. He had no idea of what to do, but he understood. He knew it was that horrible woman screaming and he knew that it was hurting Hermione.

“I’m here with you” he said “Hermione, I am here with you. You are not alone this time.”

“… will take your eyes OUT and make you swallow them…”

“You are doing very well. You are very brave, Hermione, you are the bravest person I know and I once petted a dragon.”

Somehow that brought something like a smile to Hermione’s face and from there it was easy to slowly help her get her breathing back.

“Come on Hermione, you were once under the lake for over an hour and when you got back I did not hear you gasp for breath. I mean, I am sure there was some gasping in which Krum was involved but that was a different kind altogether. Unless you have finally fallen to my charms. I know I’m irresistible. Sirius wouldn’t stop berating me about my hair. Granted, it was about the splits ends, but I know in reality he was just jealous.”

Eventually Hermione punched him weakly on the arm so he would stop teasing her and even though she didn’t speak Harry knew she was better. Bella wasn’t screaming so much, satisfied with whatever they told her, and no one was begging for mercy which was quite reassuring. Harry brought Hermione a glass of water to rinse her mouth and he cleaned the vomit.
“Is Miss feeling better?”

“Yes, thank you, Mirpy. Much better.”

“Will Miss take a chamomile tea? It will settle her stomach.”

***

Bella ended up cursing Leon Diggory after all, although she did not castrate him so he should consider himself lucky. It had not been the best moment to ask for a reward. He had kind of brought it to himself. Bellatrix had said to Edith that they would keep in touch before leaving so at least someone in the family had gotten some sort of influence.

They called for Mirpy then, to help open the bed for the master and bring him some tea and since they knew they would be distracted they used the opportunity to leave the house from the backdoor. They had already thanked the house-elf profusely and they had all shaken her hand which made her quite happy.

And Draco said he knew where to go.

It turned out that Bella coming had actually been quite fortunate. She hadn’t actually admitted to anything but it had become evident through her increasing preoccupation that she knew about Voldemort having certain “valued possessions” and that she feared in the extreme the possibility of losing one of them.

Which meant that she was the other deatheater tasked with safekeeping a horcrux. It was a relief (no, really). They had feared it were Barty Crouch Jr. and that was someone who was in no position to tell them about it. Now they knew it was her and even more they knew it was a cup (probably Helga’s famous goblet) because she had been so distressed as to ask Ida if Harry had mentioned any cups.

Ida had said yes, which was a lie, but since Bellatrix had been threatening to skin her to help her remember it was to be expected.

Draco said that there had been a Lestrange house which had been burned by an angry mob and later teared down after the war. It hadn’t been anything as spectacular as his father’s manor in any case. Few families had a state like the Malfoys.

In a way, Draco had come to understand the unconscious pattern Voldemort was following with the placement of his horcruxes. It was all about difficulty of access. There was a cave with a lake which was quite literally and evidently difficult, and there was a snake at his feet which was also difficult to get to. And then, there was symbolic difficulty and social restriction. If they were right, there would be a horcrux in Hogwarts. Hogwarts, one of the most emblematic wizarding buildings in Britain and one that was not open to everyone. Just like Malfoy manor was the manor, the house every other pureblooded family aspired to possess.

The cup would not be at the stupid Lestrange house anymore that it could had been in the Black’s house. It was obvious to Draco now. What else was wizarding and restricted? What else was safe but, most important of all, completely inaccessible to a poor orphan?

No, not just Gringotts. If you had ten galleons you could open an account in Gringotts.

It was the safety vaults in the lower levels. The ones that were as old as the building itself and protected with everything the goblins could throw. The ones the goblins kept for themselves, for the biggest treasures of the bank. The ones with a number lower than one hundredth.
Draco knew that his grandmother’s gift to Bella on her wedding day had been the title to the vault 76. Something that neither Lucius nor Narcissa Malfoy had. Something that neither Nott or Parkinson or Bullstrode or Crabbe or Goyle had. They said that Zabini’s mother had one, from one of her husbands, but who knew? They said many things about her.

Bellatrix had the vault 76 and she had been worried about a cup. That was for sure.

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The house had been empty during the hours of light but now Narcissa, like the sun and the light, had set back as others came with the darkness and the stars. A few deatheaters (not her husband or Bella’s) and Voldemort himself. A few deatheaters who had abandoned the hunt for her son because in the meantime they had found someone else.

It was as if winter were throwing back the lost people, the people supposed to be dead. First Hallow’s Eve gave them Montgomery and Elisia, now, ten days before the solstice they had found Harry Potter with Draco and the girl. Today they were running after her son and not they had gotten back another presumed dead.

If Voldemort weren’t standing there Narcissa would admit that the plan had been good. Naïve, but good.

Mulsiber had returned, weakened and tired. This was surprising but not too much as to be suspicious. He was thin and pale as if he had been locked in a dungeon for weeks which was exactly what he said had happened to him. He had only just managed to escape from his imprisonment while the Order was distracted. He told his story and it was good and afterwards the Dark Lord looked him in the eye and simply said *crucio*.

It had been a good plan. The story was perfect and they had taken care of the details. There was dirt under Mulciber’s nails and there was a smell of moist and dirt clinging to his robes. He didn’t have his wand, but it was to be expected. He shouldn’t have it if he had been locked.

But people always seemed to forget or underestimate how much of a legilimens Voldemort was. Not her, certainly, and not her husband and Snape. But others did. Dumbledore’s lackeys did.

Narcissa hadn’t spoken to her other sister in years. She did not know the girl that was currently on the floor screaming. Truly, she didn’t think of it as her floor anymore. It was not her floor or her ballroom or her house. That place was not hers just like that girl was not her niece. She didn’t know her.

She had been carrying a wand. Voldemort ordered Narcissa to retrieve it which was oddly considerate. It would had been more invasive if it were his hands feeling around the leg and the strap. He had snapped it himself though, and everybody had flinched as they always did when they saw a wand snapped. It was like severing a hand, it was something that went to their cores.

Narcissa felt nothing.

Voldemort said that he would let Bella deal with the dirty girl. A gift to his most devoted and talented servant. But Bellatrix wasn’t home yet from whatever secret errand she was running and that had kept away from the current mission. (Narcissa didn’t dare thinking that it was out of deference to her, that Bellatrix was choosing not to chase and kill Draco so as to not hurt her. After all, Lucius had jumped at the opportunity.)

Narcissa thought that if she asked for it Voldemort would give her the girl instead. She could do it
easily. Say she could not stand the idea of that dirty woman in the house, that she would rather have the family tree cleaned and trimmed quickly.

She did not know that girl and she barely knew her sister. There had always been too much of an age difference and Andromeda had left before Narcissa became a woman. But she knew the agony of having your child hurt and she knew all too well that Bellatrix would not give her a quick an easy death. Narcissa only had to say a word and she could spare a lot of pain to the girl if not to Andromeda.

But she didn’t speak. She couldn’t. She was too afraid to leave the safety of silence. Silence was good.

***

“What are you thinking about, Harry?” asked Hermione. She was feeling much better already, dinner and the stroll back home had made wonders. Besides, they were all used not to dwelling much on the bad moments. They would never get anything done otherwise. Harry had made her a cranberries and orange scone and that was it.

They were going to bed soon. They were safe for the night as no one was going to look for them in Chilligton now. The plan was to get a few hours of sleep and leave on broomstick before sunrise even if Hermione hated it.

(She hated the broomstick, the sunrise, and the certainty that they would not get a good breakfast no matter how many times Harry sang the magpie song).

By then they might had upgraded the security. Hell, Bellatrix might be standing on the vault chamber at this very moment if she had any idea of what they planned, but they would not have moved the cup from Gringotts.

It was the safest place in Britain. No one could break in.

“Your future children.” Harry said.

Hermione made a sound of horror, a bit like a startled elephant, and made every object in a two meters radius jump and fall to the ground. This was not insignificant since they had been amassing quite a considerable collection of random objects. Stuff for Harry to transform or for Draco to use as a base for a wand. Sadly, there was still no notebook which was the one single item Hermione had requested.

At this point, she should know better than to ask Harry for his thoughts in the late evening and early night.

“Don’t mind him” Draco said, folding another little package of ingredients. The house had turned out to be quite useful in that aspect. “He was an accident.”

“I was born two whole years after my parents married!” cried Harry, because he was born recklessly soon, but he was not out of bedlock. Not that it was important. “Anyway, I was just thinking of future Hermione and her kids and how they will study a lot and be very proper and formal.”

Draco was nodding along because absolutely no one could imagine any other version of Hermione’s children. The hair and skin colour changed depending on the hypothetical father, but there was absolutely no doubt that with that mother they would be good students that never got in any trouble.

“And at some point when they are teenagers, she will scold them for something very minor. Arriving
late at home or, or, skipping the extra math lessons they will be taking. You know she will make them study math.”

“Absolutely.” Music lessons, too. Draco had no doubt. And two or three languages.

“I fail to see what is the point of any this.” Hermione sounded slightly irritated but also curious.

This was one of those situations in which Ron would already be snickering.

“The point is that they will be good formal students and you will reprimand them for some very small misdemeanour and on that day, Hermione Jean Granger, on that day, dead or alive or in ghost form I don’t care, I will come and tell them about the time their mother was eighteen and she was homeless and being hunted by the Ministry.”

“Homeless and living in sin with two extremely handsome young men” added Draco, because it had to be said.

“And you were swearing!” Harry exclaimed, because it had really been a shock.

“And smoking.”

“I am not smoking!”

“Don’t worry about that, I will find you something to smoke.” Draco patted her on the arm. “Maybe get a tattoo on your butt cheek.”

He ducked just in time to avoid the rolled-up newspaper.

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“What the fuck are they doing?”

Percy didn’t usually swear, but he was alone, his mother would never know and he felt like the situation merited it.

A seer doesn’t choose the prophecy, the prophecy chooses you and yadda yadda, as if Percy cared about the theory. He had sort of learned to dismiss or call for specific visions in addition to the ones he was getting from the unbreakable vow although it was all very unstable. From time to time he got something that had nothing to do with him and the present situation, something that wasn’t even bad and therefore not useful and he didn’t know what to do with it.

He had seen himself eating a three chocolates cake at a wedding. That was it. He didn’t know who was getting married or where or when. He just knew that they would serve a three chocolates cake and that it would be quite good, mouth-watering even. Percy was glad to know.

(There was someone sitting at his side in that vision. He didn’t get to see who, but it was someone familiar and their smell was absolutely enthralling).

Now in between saving his father’s life (again) and figuring out where exactly he was supposed to apparate in a week’s time, he saw as freaking Harry Potter planned a break in into Gringotts.

Gringotts.

“Why are you showing me this?” asked Percy to the universe. Why. Why indeed. He didn’t need this. He didn’t need the cake vision either but he almost got to taste it in his lips and feel that maddening smell once more.
“I don’t need this” he said aloud. The universe, however, didn’t care. Neither did the cruel gods that were sending him the visions. It was probably the same gods that had given him uncombable curly hair.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake.” He went on, waving his hands to the empty air. “They got caught, of course they were caught. What did you expect Harry!? It’s only the most secure building in Britain. And, and, and Hermione, I expected better of you. How could you-? How could she go along with that plan? She is supposed to be the smart one here. Circe’s curls, we are all doomed. I see it now, it’s up to me to save the world.”

Percy gave a couple of steps back and flopped down on the couch. His blue eyes were glazed over, lost in the distance and the time.

“Oh, thank Merlin, yes, listen to her! And you better marry her too, she is the only sensible person around here. No… no, no, no, no. For fuck’s sake. No. Step away from that. Step. Away. That’s bound to blow up in your face you idiot. Don’t- oh, he did it anyway.”

The vision vanished slowly leaving Percy with a feeling of irritation he mostly felt whenever he saw his father sneaking away.

“They better be the ones serving that cake.”

Chapter End Notes

Note: Canon says that Bellatrix’ vault is in the 500-700 range, but I like this much better.
The trip to London went reasonably well. Harry thought he might had shrunk a size number in his waist, so tight was Hermione clinging to him, but otherwise she took it really well and after an hour she stopped singing “ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod, think happy thoughts, happy thoughts, haaaaAAAaaappy thoughts, we are going to diiiie.”

Harry and Draco made a point of flying smoothly and perhaps slower than if they had been by themselves. They were once again grabbing each other’s brooms which in addition to being a very funny sentence now it made for a less bumpy flight. The brooms were a bit different so it was better to fly this way. Harry’s Moonrider was bigger (hence why Hermione rode with him) whereas Draco’s old Comet 460 wasn’t very good with high altitude or strong winds but it had better maneuverability.

It also had the name JOHNSON engraved on the handle. Harry had to take five minutes for himself after he saw that.

In the end they arrived to Diagon Alley a bit after ten in the morning. This was a bit late for what they were planning. One would think they should had been there long before the bank opened. But usually at this time they were just finishing breakfast and sometimes they were just starting because they saw no reason to wake up early.

(Harry couldn’t stop thinking of how Angelina and Alicia and the twins used to complain when Oliver made them get up before nine for Quidditch training).

In any case they were there and they had hidden the brooms in an alley and Harry was standing there, eyes closed and arms extended, mumbling to himself like a druid or a priest, one that kept repeating that he was an alien, a legal alien, in the city of New York. They were shrouded in a glamour that would make them unremarkable. They were ready to enter Gringotts.

They went in, saw Bellatrix in the foyer, and went out again.

“Let’s just wait until she is done” said Harry “we will keep an eye in case we see her leave with a package.”

“Shouldn’t we try to go closer and listen to what she says?” That was Hermione of course. She had never let some little panic stop her while she was moving forward in life.

“I would rather eat glass” said Draco in utter and honest seriousness. Just because Hermione took it worse it didn’t mean Bella didn’t have an effect on the others. It wasn’t just them. She tended to have that effect on people who weren’t interested in having sex with her.

(More interesting were the cases when both reactions colluded).

Harry wanted to wait by the café on the corner but they didn’t have any money and it would be incredibly weird to pay for three cups of tea with a check. They were forced to wait standing around and it was—not miserable, miserable was too big a word, but it was not nice. It was cold and wet and windy and they all wished they could had waited inside drinking some hot and delicious beverage.

Draco produced a big poster of the Puddlemere United that for some unfathomable reason he had taken with him. He started to fold it carefully in many pieces and when he was done and he unfolded it, holding it with both hands, it looked like he was studying a map and that guaranteed that the few
people that were ambling around gave them a wide berth lest they asked them for directions.

Bella didn’t stay much longer in the bank, but it felt far too long. The weather was horrible. She was dressed nicely, velvet in her skirts, rubies in her ears, a nice big cloak with embroidery in the cuffs and the hem. The only thing ugly about Bella was her character and her soul.

She didn’t seem to be carrying anything other than her wand.

She didn’t stay long. She walked down the white marble stairs and as she reached the bottom and stood just ten steps from them she apparated away.

They didn’t move. They almost felt like she would be there if they turned around. But no, she was really gone. It’s not as if she had looked at them and she hadn’t recognized them. She simply hadn’t looked at all. Just like yesterday nobody thought to question Mirpy of what she might have heard. She was too high and powerful to even remember there was a floor and people living in there.

The next part would be a bit more difficult.

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“Um, Harry Potter. I wish to access my vault.”

Hermione was at his right, with her needle pointing at the goblin, Zertuk, read the little plaque. Draco was on his left and with his back to them, ready to fight everyone in the bank if things went awry.

“Number 687” said the goblin who seemed unaware that Harry Potter was, well, Harry Potter, Undesirable Number One “Press your palm or touch your wand here, sir.”

He pushed a golden orb towards Harry without rising his eyes from whatever he was looking at behind the counter. Harry touched it gingerly with the end of his wand. Better to lose the wand that having his hand glued to the orb if this was a trap. But it wasn’t. The orb emitted one single pulse of light and Zertuk nodded in satisfaction.

“Will you be going alone, sir?”

“Ah, no. No, no. They are coming with me.”

“Follow me, then.”

Sirius had told them that goblins didn’t seem to care at all about human affairs, but they really hadn’t thought it would be to this degree. Between this and the absurdly long wait of yesterday it felt as if Harry had become completely irrelevant to the war.

(If that were true, how glad his parents would be).

Zertuk took them to the main door and to the tracks with the little carts. It was a bit of a tight fit but at least being pressed together avoided any jostling as the cart took corners at full speed.

“I hate this” murmured Hermione after the third quick turn in less than a minute. Harry would have said something if he weren’t completely focused on keeping his glasses on his face. Draco too had his mouth closed tight and a look of concentration.

The cart came to a halt abruptly and Harry felt as his stomach climbed up to his lungs. “Vault 687” called Zertuk, jumping down.

“Thank you” they said as they got to the platform and slowly shook their organs back into place. The
goblin, of course, seemed to be perfectly composed and not even a little bit shaken.

“I, um, we will probably be down here a while” said Harry. He was so shaken by the trip that he managed to cover the lie quite well. “No need for you to hang around. We will call you.”

“Of course, sir.” Zerkut said as pleasantly as a goblin could be.

Harry opened the door to his vault with barely shaking hands and they all got in. Harry noticed almost absentmindedly how much gold there was there. The time Hagrid took him he hadn’t cared at all if it didn’t serve him to buy his dad’s freedom and most of the rest of the time someone else took the money for him. Perhaps they feared that Harry would refuse to step back out of the vault. Harry would be the first to admit that he might have tried it if given the chance.

So he hadn’t paid much attention to the gold and even now he wasn’t really interested in it but this time he couldn’t help really noticing it. There were piles and piles of it. Enough, he thought, that he could buy a house. Enough to get his old house back and add a few rooms and wasn’t that a nice thought? A house were Remus and Severus and Sirius and Draco and him could all live after the war.

It would have to be a big house because even in his fantasies Harry could see that Sirius and Severus were a difficult combination. But most importantly it was a thought for after. Harry didn’t have many thoughts for that time. He had a to-do list of things he wanted to do if he managed to both win and survive the war (get back Regulus’ body, find the family of James the muggle, get something nice for Dobby, Kreacher and Mirpy…) but he didn’t have much thoughts for himself. Almost as if he still weren’t sure he would make it.

And now, look at it, a fully formed thought of what his life could be. Almost as if he had started dreaming while he wasn’t looking. He even knew the tone of yellow he wanted for the living room and the lovely dark blue and silver or white that he would have in his (and Draco’s) bed.

His hand found Draco’s and he squeezed.

“Since we are here, we could take some money with us” said Hermione, ever practical.

“Oh!” Harry had maybe forgotten about that. Yes, he was an adult and could take his own money now. That meant that the next stakeout could be indoors in a warm coffee shop. “Yes, yes, absolutely. Let’s all take some.”

They took the money and even made sure to include some knuts and sickles so they would have small change. Paying for a cup of tea with a galleon drew unnecessary attention. Maybe not if you were a Malfoy, but being a Malfoy was also unnecessary attention. This also served to pass the time a little bit and make sure that by the time they opened the door the goblin, what his name, Cephir, were well out of hearing.

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His name was Zerkut and he hadn’t gone anywhere. He was standing there, next to the cart and looking straight at them in a sick parody of Mirpy.

“On second thought” said Draco “we will stay here for the next eight hours. I am not sure we counted all the sickles. Carry on, sir, no need to wait for us.”

“Of course, sir” Zerkut nodded his head.

They closed the door and waited anxiously for the sound of the cart leaving, which, of course, didn’t
come.
And didn’t come.
And didn’t come.

“You are still there, aren’t you?” called Harry less than an hour later. It seemed like they had exhausted all their patience yesterday and the idea of waiting to out-bore a goblin was unbearable.

“Yes, sir” came Zerkut’s voice muffled by the heavy door.

“Would you mind leaving?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You didn’t leave.”

“No, sir.”

“Draco, you better think of something.”

“Me?” Draco looked up from the castle he was building out of galleons. He was using the sickles to make the water in the moat.

“Certainly not us” said Harry and he couldn’t know, none of them could, but in that moment he sounded just as his father, just as when James got on McGonall’s or Moody’s nerves by being insanely lucky and brave. “I just offered him a cupcake and Hermione wants to petrificus totalus him. I am not sure that it will work. They say professor Flitwick is less than ¼ goblin and I have seen him shake lots of foul charms in class.”

Hermione, who was eating the rejected cupcake, nodded her head. Neville had accidentally hit Flitwick many times and he always took it in stride.

“Well…” Draco scrubbed his face with both hands. They could always try to dig a tunnel from this vault to another one.

Draco’s plan worked for six whole minutes which was a pathetically short time for what they wanted to do. They hadn’t even left the six hundredths vaults yet. It was, however, a record in the history of Gringotts. People hardly got minutes into a break-in before being stopped with strength and usually lasting consequences like death or horrible disfiguration.

It was quite embarrassing that it had worked at all. Draco had lured Zerkut in by loudly and very obnoxiously insisting that there were three knuts missing from the vault. As soon as the goblin had stepped in, he had turned on his heels and slammed the door behind them leaving the goblin trapped inside.

“GOOoooOOooo!!” he had yelled, flushed with excitement.
The obvious next step was to get in the cart and drive it to vault 76. Except that by now they were all too realistic and knew that most likely they wouldn’t even get it to run and if they did they would smash against the first corner they found and even if by some miracle they avoided certain death against a wall they would still get lost and not know how to brake.

So they bypassed the cart, kicking it down, and simply started running along the tracks.

During those six minutes Zertuk dragged his finger across the lock to open the vault’s door, righted the upturned cart, got inside, waited to hear in which direction they had gone and started the cart to go get them.

“Will you get in, sir?”

So it was very embarrassing for the goblins because they prided themselves in the security of the bank, but the way Zertuk spoke, they were also quite embarrassed.

“We all know where to go and he can’t chase the three of us at the same time” said Draco already bending his knees in preparation. In his first year he had been terrified at the notion of being at night in the Forbidden Forest and now he was suggesting a full on run through Gringotts.

Zertuk extended an arm with a long bony hand and grabbed Harry’s arm with an iron grip. Harry wished they would still try Draco’s suggestion, it was very smart and he could probably hold Zertuk up long enough to give them a decent headstart.

But, of course, it was not going to happen and Zertuk knew it very well. They were not leaving without Harry.

They were not getting back in the cart either. They stood there, in the half darkness of the tunnel. It was surprisingly warm for an underground place and the air felt stiff and dense. The moment was incredibly awkward and Zertuk seemed willing to ride it through.

“Look” said Harry. He was starting to lose sensation in his hand. The goblin’s grip was really strong.

“I realize we have put you in a difficult position and I apologize, but we are in a very important mission.”

“Of course, sir” said the goblin with the same damned neutral pleasantness of the last two hours.

Draco chortled on an indignant squeak and only at the last second realized that Zertuk had said it with that intention hoping that Draco would jump within grabbing reach. The goblin had a perfect resting face, but there was something like amusement and wickedness in his eyes.

“I know this is quite out of bounds, but we are dealing with an exceptional situation.” Harry went on.

“Of course, sir. Now get in the cart.”

“Oh, Zertuk please!” Harry had his full attention on him and an earnest voice and he was just so pure and good, here with borrowed clothes and a bit of soot in his cheeks. “It is not for me, it is to help stop the unholy terror that is V.”

“No.”

“No?” Draco was honestly surprised.

“But, but, but… Don’t you want to see him fall?” asked Harry.
“Think about how he treats your race” said Hermione who had been subtly circling them.

Zertuk shrugged, his hand still holding fast to Harry.

“Business has been good.”

It had been pretty good. There had been quite a lot of movements and the goblins charged a fee for every transaction. McNair had quickly become insultingly rich but they had gotten a nice share of it.

Only, of course, the bank had stopped being completely under goblin management. They had gone back to how things were four hundredth years ago after that war the wizards never talked about when they also imposed a human manager.

For a while it had seemed as if Malfoy (that Malfoy, not this weird wand snapping version) would be the new manager and the goblins had been sort of satisfied with it. Malfoy had a passing knowledge of finances which is not something that could be said of most wizards. However in the end he had kept his legwork assignment, tasked with finding and capturing the resistance members, and Gringotts had gotten Tarquino Rendels. Whether Rendels knew anything about finances or not soon became irrelevant since he seemed more interested in waiving all fees to deatheaters and alike.

So now Gringotts wasn’t making as much of a profit and they had a human wizard manager and if it weren’t for all the hassle of moving they would have emptied all the vaults and left via the underground tunnels to the branch of the bank in Geneva.

(They might have some people assigned to calculating the cost of such a move).

It would be a difficult decision, though. Gringotts’ reputation was a valuable asset and they didn’t want to put in jeopardy. This was part of the reason why the usually tried to stay away from human politics.

The other being that they just didn’t like humans.

Some humans, however, were acceptable. Still grossly inclined to hyperbole and convinced that the world revolved around them and that only their stories mattered, yet willing to try a new script once in a while. Goblins didn’t like deviation of rules, but they appreciated it in others.

“Is it true?” Zertuk asked, looking at Draco.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but as a Malfoy and a Slytherin I can tell you it probably isn’t.”

“They say that you took seven wands and that you gave them to seven goblins.” Zertuk’s voice did something then, abandoning the formal and professional drone.

“Oh, that!” Draco didn’t hesitate. Draco had spent many years surrounded by lies, chasing lies, eating lies and above all believing those lies. “That’s not true.”

Zertuk was looking at him and it seemed like he was very deliberately not blinking.

“Harry took, what was it? Three? Oh, two. And Hermione took three. I didn’t pick any, although if you are speaking of power claims, on account of having bested the owner in duel, then I think I get one. Not sure about that other guy because we all hexed him. But I did give one of them to Gryphook and made sure to choose one that would suit him.”

Zertuk looked at him some more. After thirty seconds, he blinked. It was a very slow blink.
On account of that, I think I won’t be making an arrest for attempted theft and therefore you won’t be handed to human authorities. I do have to ask you to leave, however.” His voice was back to business mode, but there was something, a crinkle on the corner of his eyes, a glimmer there, that said that perhaps he had heard the story just as it was. Goblins didn’t like metaphors or exaggeration, and Zertuk approved both of Draco’s unheard of gift in the form of a wand and of his unusual truthfulness.

“Thank you!” said Harry, already thinking how could they convince Bella to take the cup home and steal it from there. “That’s very nice.” He was opening and closing his hand in a fist to get some blood circulation.

“and not applicable.”

Zertuk’s hand closed painfully on Harry’s arm, but it was probably more due to surprise than anything. He turned to look at Hermione with curiosity and not a little bit of appalment. Who was this creature who dared fighting with a goblin?

“You don’t agree, miss?” he said softly and full of vitriol but nothing they hadn’t heard ten times stronger with Severus.

“No, sir.” Hermione answered, straightening her back. “I do appreciate the gesture and I am all for bigger inter-species cooperation.”

Harry smiled proudly at that.

“But you say our arrest would be for attempted theft while that has never been our intention.”

It would had been enough if Zertuk hadn’t said anything and let the situation speak for itself. There they were, in the middle of a dark corridor, having run from Harry’s vault after slamming the door behind him. However Zertuk also felt the need to widen his eyes a little bit. His shoulders did something weird almost as if he were restraining a bigger movement, a big extension of the arms, most likely, accompanied by a loud “come on!”

“I realize you have found us under suspicious circumstances, but the truth is we never intended to unlawfully subtract any treasure deposited in the bank.”

By then Zertuk’s grip had loosened a little bit, enough that Harry could feel the blood flowing again. Under the faint light reflected on the walls he could see Draco smiling like a maniac. In that moment he looked a lot like Sirius Black.

“No?” offered Zertuk.

“No. But I will admit to wanting to cause some lasting damage. That, however, should only account to vandalism, not theft.”

Zertuk still wasn’t convinced, but he certainly was closer to their side. So not only he did not arrest them but he also didn’t send them out of the bank and instead decided to take them to vault 712 which was nearby and unused and so it had become a secret lounge room for employees.

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“The problem is trespassing” Zertuk said as he nursed in his hand a cup with some foul smelling beverage. “We simply can not allow you to get access to the vault.”

“That should not be a problem” said Fleur.
The lounge was really **secret**, so much so that most of the ground level employees didn’t know about it. When they arrived there the room had been empty except for Bill and Fleur who were enthusiastically snogging on a corner and had taken two full minutes before they noticed that there was someone else in there.

Bill, who was a gentleman (and Harry had been completely justified in his crush) had turned around first and sort of shielded Fleur so she could straighten her clothes and hair.

And then he had actually taken a look at them.

“**Harry?**”

Bill had been dumbfounded, which was understandable because they were probably the last people he ever expected to surprise him in his secret snogging spot. Fleur, however, had been **elated**. She had emitted a short bird-like shriek before running towards them. She had embraced Draco first, long and tight while exclaiming something in rapid fire French. Then she had hugged Harry equally long and tight and Harry could feel it, all right? He could feel how damned happy she was to see them. She had stopped before Hermione in confusion, blinked, and said “of course! Victor’s girl” and she had hugged her too even though they didn’t really know each other that well and according to her Hermione had changed the most.

Zertuk had given her a look, half threat and half humour, daring her to hug the goblin, the ugly non-human. Fleur had hesitated just a bit before her face acquired a mischievous expression. Fleur, this Harry knew well, never backed-up of a challenge.

She hugged Zertuk, although not so tight, and she kissed him on both cheeks. “You know I only date Bill because you wouldn’t take me.”

Bill had laughed at that. He had also laughed as he hugged Draco and lifted him from the floor (“Nooooo!”) and he laughed and laughed as he looked at Harry and Hermione and squeezed them together while he hugged both of them at the same time. He laughed like a man who hadn’t had much reason to recently and was clinging desperately to the first piece of good news he got in months.

And now here they were, drinking strange tea that smelled like pomegranates and eating stale cookies, as they explained how they wanted to break into Bellatrix Lestrange’s private vault and smash one of her possessions.

“It does not have to be them” said Fleur. “It doesn’t have to be you, Harry, is not it? It can be anyone.”

“Oh, yes. Anyone can do it.” Horcrux breaking was an activity for everyone.

“So we can open the vault ourselves and break the thing. We won’t have given unlawful access to non-employees.” Fleur waved her hand, her fingers moving like the fluttering of a butterfly. Everything about her was beautiful and today, in this dark room in the war, it was really good to see something beautiful.

Zertuk looked up to the ceiling, contemplating.

“We could certainly enter the vault legitimately.” He said, eyes till to the ceiling. “I am not so sure about the destruction of property.”

“It can be done if it becomes hazardous to the bank’s personnel or the security of the vault, its contents, nearby vaults and the building as a whole” said Bill as if he were reading from a book. “I
had to remove a decaying carpet at the beginning of the year that was eating the stone floor.”

“This would be a cup that contains a piece of Tom Riddle’s soul” said Draco.

There was a very heavy pause.

“Tom Riddle is…”

“The boss of the current Minister.”

“Ah.”

Zertuk, Bill and Fleur shared a look.

“That sounds hazardous to me.” Said Bill “I can attest to the horrible effects a similar object had in Hogwarts.”

“Failing to declare such a risk goes against bank policy” Zertuk was irked about it. “And we only store living entities or components under very special circumstances and only after favourable bank-issued report.”

“But if his name is Riddle” said Fleur, her eyes jumping over all of them in quick succession “why would he call himself Flight of Death?” Fleur didn’t seem all that shocked by the whole ripping a piece of your soul thing. She most likely thought that it was to be expected of a culture that ate red beans at breakfast.

“I thought he might have meant theft” Draco said. “But that doesn’t make it better.”

“No, it does not.”

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“Perce?”

“No Perce. He is angry with the family, remember?”

“Oh, yes, yes.” Arthur Weasley looked down, crestfallen. “I always wonder if we had gotten him a different pet when he was younger…”

Arthur Weasley was currently bleeding from a cut on his forehead and he had taken two *confundus* straight to the chest. Thankfully this time it had been snatchers, more interested in capturing him alive and getting a reward than on killing him.

Percy kneeled before him and made a quick check of the pupils and the head. His hands were trembling a little bit and his heart was beating madly. This was, what? The sixth or seventh time he had rescued his father. It never got any easier, never was less scary, and this time he had seemed to recognize him somehow even though Percy was wearing his usual disguise.

“I am sure you did nothing wrong.” He said kindly as he dabbed at his father’s forehead with a handkerchief. He sighed tiredly. “Mister Weasley, why are you here? You are not supposed to be here.”

He really wasn’t. How he kept sneaking from both Molly and Moody’s attentive eyes was a mystery and a headache for Percy.

“Tonks is in danger” mumbled Arthur as Percy helped him to get up.
“Colour me surprised” Percy said, not even bothering to ask if he meant father or daughter because they were both terrible troublemakers. Who would have thought that Andromeda Black would actually the sensible one in that family?

“I will walk you to the town. It’s muggle, I am sure you will love it. You can stay there until you feel better and it’s safe for you to apparate.”

“Oh, thank you, dear. Most appreciated.”

“It is not trouble, Mister Weasley.”

Behind remained three frogs, belly-up and dead. Percy did not like killing people and he knew that when he finally got to have a nervous breakdown all these deaths would have a big part in it. He did not like it yet he found it easy, which only made him dislike it even more.

These men were not going to kill his father, but they would have sold him to the people who would kill him and so it was easy for Percy to first transform them into frogs and then to kill them. He probably shouldn’t had because they most certainly were carrying important information in their pockets that was now lost. He had gotten some papers from the fourth snatcher, the only one who managed to escape (minus two fingers) and that should have to be enough.

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“Bill, um, if it is okay to ask, what happened to your face?”

Bill now sported a long scarred line that took over his forehead, the bridge of his nose, the cheekbone and even a bit of the skin around the eye. It was angry red and ugly and it looked like it kept scabbing and reopening. However, Bill had always carried himself with confidence. He had good reason to. Good looking, intelligent, adequately good at sports even if he was not a champion. So even though the scar was ugly he made it work. His coolness had not diminished even a little bit. If the scar were not bleeding in some points his coolness factor would have augmented.

“Oh, that?” he smiled and made a gesture that Harry had seen many times in the twins “I did it myself. I thought Fleur should be the pretty one in the couple.”

“I am the beauty and the brains” she said quickly. She looked at him and smiled lovingly. That girl was so in love that it looked painful.

“Because it looks like werewolf injuries to me” said Harry calmly. This, he had learned, was a bit of a taboo topic with wizards. Like suggesting an embarrassing disease. “They are cursed, so they keep reopening and are very hard to heal. I know a potion, a cream more like, that helps with the scarring and some others for joint pain if you need them now.”

Right. Because Harry had been raised by a werewolf. Somehow once you knew him people kept forgetting about that.

The trip down to the under one-hundredth vaults was long and they had had to take two carts to get there. Harry was sitting on the floor of one, squeezed between Fleur and Bill while another goblin named Lykop drove their cart. Only goblins were allowed to do it.

The way he had looked at Zertuk when he asked him to take them down had been incredible, long and hard and so very judging. But he had also agreed to do it, Merlin knew why. He had said yes even before he asked Draco if it was true that he had given a goblin three magic wands, one of gold, one of silver and one of plain oak.
“Gold is a terrible material for a wand” Draco had said as if the goblin had suggested using a plastic straw. “But Hermione can show you a silver wand, it is a thing of beauty.”

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Harry seriously doubted that it actually took ten minutes to open the vault under normal conditions. Most likely the goblins were making up rituals to stretch the time and underline the futility of their break-in attempt.

That thing Zertuk had blew over the lock? He could say that it was golden dust from the nests of the birds of prey in the Calacar Mountains all he wanted. Harry knew it was cookie crumbs from the lounge. He wasn’t going to say anything, though. Just as he wasn’t going to mention that he had accidentally figured out that there were at least two other entrances unknown to the public. This was particularly meritorious because he had been giving Bill and Fleur the cream recipe at the time.

At last, after one last murmured enchantment, Zertuk put his knobbly hands on the handle and opened the door to vault number 76.

And to think that just an hour ago Harry had been daydreaming about the wonderful future he could buy with his parents’ money. A house with four bedrooms and a nice garden and a library. He had felt incredibly fortunate then.

The amount of gold in Bellatrix Lestrange’s vault was obscene. Piles and piles of it that reached up to the ceiling. Beyond that, there were dozens of objects. Three delicate vases of blue porcelain, a standing mirror with a golden girl and a swan holding the frame, two different sets of silverware, one silver the other jade, a table with two small chests full of jewellery… There were also other, darker, objects like the skull with some strange symbols engraved over it or the box with twelve black candles tightly packed. There was a set of a silver comb and hairpins similar to the one they had found in Grimmauld Place said to drive the user mad with nightmares. There was whip with seven red knots.

“It will be a silver cup with the seal of Helga Hufflepuff” Hermione said as the two goblins stood by the entrance.

“She was here this morning” said Lykop. “Added two extra layers of security, no fee, and she spent twenty minutes alone in the vault.”

Bill and Fleur were standing right behind the goblins with similar looks of interest and appraisal.

“I see gemino and flagrante” said Bill. His right hand had come to rest on Fleur’s shoulders.

“The mirror has been moved” she said, her hand coming up to touch Bill’s. “It is a Smeriglio from the venetian workshop. It will lock inside its surface anyone who comes close enough. But if you shine a white light in it, it won’t get you.”

“Do you smell rotten apples?” Bill asked. Everybody sniffed as if in command but they had been through so many places that their sense of smell was shot. There had been fire, ash, sulphur, the wet smell of underground rock, the oil in the tracks of the carts and that damned pomegranate tea.

Bill kneeled on the floor and pressed his face down, peered at the floor of the vault from different angles.

“I think she might have spread cupertine spice.” He said, getting back up. “It slowly burns living skin. Terribly painful. Saw plenty of it when I was studying in Egypt”
“Can’t you shield yourself with a potion of pearl and-? What’s the word, you put it in water, connard, comment dit-on? Savon. That’s sapo, sapot, sopon. Arrg, ça me soule!”

“Soap” said Draco.

“Yes! ah, tu es un véritable treasure, Coco.”

“That would work” Bill was smiling at her as if her frustration with the language were the most entertaining and illuminating thing in the world. “But it is too much trouble. Cupertine spice is very intense and effective but only in dry climates. As soon as it gets wet, it decays, and leaves behind that smell of rotten apples.”

There was an undertone to Bill’s words that came to say that this was why both curse setting and curse breaking should be let to the professionals.

So they got inside (Gringotts employees only, of course) and were careful not to touch anything and to shine a light into the mirror and indeed, right behind it there was a silver cup with Hufflepuff’s crest.

“If she comes later on and complains, I am telling her that any damage was caused by misapplication of Cupertine spice.” Said Bill as he looked around for a good place to lay the cup. He set it on the stone floor by the entrance, away from the rest of the treasure. He was wearing gloves of iron and dragonskin.

“Destroyed beyond magical repair, you said?” Zertuk was leaning down slightly as he studied the cup with better light. “We goblins are excellent craftsmen. We can repair almost anything.”

“We used basilisk venom in the past” said Harry, in case that helped. “And a potion, but it takes days to brew it and it was not very stable.”

“Dumbledore used fiendfyre” noted Hermione. “He could control it quite well, so it wouldn’t burn everything else.”

The goblins’ expression betrayed their doubts about how well could Dumbledore had controlled it. They muttered for a while between them until they reached an agreement and Lykop jumped into the cart.

“We will have to wait a little bit” informed Zertuk, always prepared to give the customer a pleasant experience.

That was all right. Fleur and Draco were happy to chat with each other. Complaining together, most likely. While Bill turned his attention to Hermione and Harry.

He was very, very, happy to see them.

“Do you think… Could you get a message to Ron?” said Hermione. “I know it’s very risky, so maybe during Christmas break. Oh, and do you know who is taking care of Crookshanks?”

“I really don’t want him to get in trouble, but if he could have a look around for special objects” added Harry.

Bill’s eyes turned the colour of sorrow. They had been sparkly and blue like the sky in the spring, and now suddenly they were blue like a funeral. “I am so sorry, Hermione, Harry.”

Harry was already grasping Hermione’s hand and he didn’t know which one of them was grabbing
tighter. Please, no. Please, no, it wasn’t even his birthday, it was –whatever month they were in. Please, let Ron be all right.

“Hogwarts has been in lockdown since the beginning of the course. Absolutely no communication in or out” Bill explained. He was the eldest of seven siblings and he couldn’t speak with four of them. The other two were miles away. Charlie in Romania and Percy in whatever world that had made him so distant. “Snape is keeping them hostage, you know. Making sure that all their families behave.”

“Snape” said Harry hollowly. He was only now feeling like his heart was beginning to beat again.

“Yes, he is the Headmaster now. Would you believe it?”

“Oh, that bastard” Hermione’s hand jumped on Harry’s hold. To Harry’s ears she sounded full of relief and happiness, but since people weren’t used to her swearing Bill took it differently.

“I know… Rumour says that they are indoctrinating the children, making new forces for You-Know-Who.”

“I believe it” Harry had more experience pretending to hate or at least heavily dislike Snape. “I am sure he is drilling them to the floor.”

“Some people were hoping that they would be allowed out during Christmas, at least some of them. But it probably won’t be the case. Don’t take this wrong, I am glad that you are all right and you made a number in the Ministry. But now they are worried and lashing back. Tightening their hold on people.”

“Right, right.”

“And they have had some losses.”

“Really?” Harry lightened up. He didn’t have to pretend with this. “Do tell.”

Of course Bill being a Gryffindor and a Weasley didn’t know much. His position was fragile enough as it was. But people talked, they always did, and information trickled down from the Ministry to the streets. It was known that there was an organized movement of resistance, the old Order was Bill’s guess, helping people get away and fighting wherever they could.

And sometimes, when people were alone, when it was daylight, because nobody dared whispering secrets in the night anymore, when they were behind closed door and they had been with someone long enough to know they were not polyjuiced, then they might imply something. They wouldn’t say it directly, nothing that could be too compromising, but they would allude to the fact that Rosier, big bad Rosier with a double digit murder count, hadn’t been seen in a long while and neither had a few others.

All dangerous deatheaters, all in positions of influence. The second best duellist (after Bella). The man who retrieved the Dark Lord’s wand. Montgomery, who wasn’t much as a wizard but his family had excellent connections all around the continent. Pureblooded Mulciber who thought himself the next Malfoy in terms on influence and knowledge of secrets. They were all gone.

Not all at once. If it were at once it would almost be like a declaration of war. But they had vanished and people had filled the space they left behind with words. Words about what had made them go. Words about what could they know.

What if, while they were all distracted looking at Voldemort, another bigger wizard was rising somewhere else? Grindewald had come from the continent and in his prime he controlled a territory
five times larger than Voldemort’s. So what if someone else was preparing to rise? It would only take one big duel to depose Voldemort and seize his kingdom. It seemed impossible, but this hypothetical secret dark wizard had gained quite a lot on allies. The second best duellist, the man with the wand… Maybe, some said, even that boy who kept disappearing.

“One” said Harry, blinking quickly to gather his ideas “why do they keep assuming it’s a man? It could be a witch. And two, even if there were such a person, I would not go to help them.”

“No, of course not” said Bill. “We know that now, thanks to your visit to the Ministry the other day. But in reality, it doesn’t change much.”

“But could there really be someone? Some other lunatic who wants to take over the world?” asked Hermione.

“Nah, Charlie says Europe is too divided at the moment and no one wants to take leadership because it means making yourself a target for when Him decides to invade. They are already doing terrible things in Ireland.”

“We read some, but The Prophet doesn’t say much.”

“If someone is going to be the next Big Dark Lord” interrupted Fleur suddenly “is going to be Victor! Him and Cedric, they work very well.”

She smiled like a proud mama. The Triwizard Tournament had been completely insane (seriously, they kidnapped their friends and family) and they had soon stopped being rivals and became friends. Fleur was very happy with their work.

Soon after they heard the sound of a cart approaching and Lykop returned.

***

Other than the fact that it was carved out of bone the box looked like a box. It was white and about half the size of a shoe box. Lykop passed it to Bill carefully and with great ceremony while Zertuk waved at them to indicate they should step back. There was as a brief argument between Bill and Fleur over who got to hold the box. Bill won, by virtue of being the tallest, which didn’t make much sense.

(Harry didn’t miss Draco’s quick side eye to check if he should implement that rule in their future.)

There was the vault with its treasure, the cup on the floor and Bill holding the bone box. He looked at said box and then at them.

“Step farther back, no farther, a little bit more.”

“There is a wall” said Hermione.

“In, fact, there is no need to have you here to see this. You could walk down the tunnel to the corner.”

“William” said Hermione in her Prefect voice.

The next part wasn’t pretty or heroic and in fact should never be recorded in a story. The next part consisted on Bill bringing the box closer to the cup while at the same time attempting to put his body as far away as possible. The resulting image was similar to that of a giraffe drinking.
They also got to see that Bill had very nice thighs and a wonderful ass. In fact, even though Harry did not understand a word, he was pretty sure Fleur was saying to Draco just that. She had elbowed him and smirked in a way that clearly said “check it out, that’s my man.”

Then Bill opened the box and the fires of seven different hells erupted out of it. There was a bit of the typical yellow and orange you expect in a fire, but only in the tongues that escaped to the sides. The main flame was white and angry. There might had been a bit of a blue tint to it, but it might had also been their eyes going crazy from the sudden intensity. There was also a sound like a roar, high an uninterrupted, but below it Harry thought he could hear that high pitched shriek that by now was almost familiar.

Bill closed the box. It was as if he had killed them, as if he had taken their hearts. The darkness and the silence were so sudden.

It took them a while to regain their breaths and their sight. The air of the tunnel felt much colder now after that heat.

“Well, let’s see” muttered Bill “lumos.”

He was squatting now, the box on the floor with a hand on top so it wouldn’t open accidentally. Unfortunately, the cup was also on the floor.

“Mmh, that’s strange…”

And then the cup collapsed, like chocolate under the sun, folding on to itself.

Bill brought the box back to Lykop and then he levitated the silvery goop back to where they had found the cup while Fleur shone a light against the cursed mirror.

“It’s just past two” said Draco, who always, always, always carried a watch with him. Socks? No. He forgot to put on those. But he had his watch on his wrist. “Isn’t that nice?”

Afterwards they got back in the carts and they were brought to the surface. It would had been safer if they had left through one of the others doors but Harry supposed it was too much to ask of the goblins. That was all right. He had stored that knowledge safely just as he added another point to his to-do list.

(He really couldn’t die now, not with that list of things to do).

They all had a headache, from the ride in the cart and the intense fire and the wet cold, and they were tired and hungry. Harry tried to put the glamour back and make it big, one that would really allow them to interact with people without being recognized, but he failed. That was the thing with his magic, he could do wonderful things but only if he was in the right mood.

“Well, I am hungry” said Draco. “See if you can find a safe place to eat. I am going to go get us some sandwiches.”

That said, he went into the nearest shop. He did put a hood over his hair and since his biggest characteristic was hidden and he did not enter strutting and making taboo declarations, the witch in the counter did not recognize him at all. To be fair, even if Draco had kept his hair visible she might not had realize it was him. This Draco was sullen, with his hands in his pockets to protect them from the cold, and ill-dressed. This was not the Draco Malfoy that lived in the collective memory. He didn’t even ask what kind of cheese there were in the sandwiches when he would usually have scowled at the selection.
There was a very nice narrow alley with a dumpster in it that made for a good hiding spot. It got rejected for that same reason, since it seemed like a very obvious place to hide. Instead they ate their sandwiches (simple ham and cheese, but way better than the ones in the Ministry) standing in front of the showcase of Magical Menagerie. It was far less suspicious to stand there for a while looking at the animals while they ate, rather than spending more than ten seconds near the dumpster.

“We should get better clothes” said Hermione. “Warm and sturdy.”

“Do you have anything against that sweater?”

According to Draco, Hermione should never again dress in black because it didn’t favour her. White was her colour, but not pastels.

“No, no. The sweater is great, Draco. But I could do with a better coat and a change of underwear.”

“It would be nice to have a shower” Draco conceded. They had tried *evanesco* on themselves but it wasn’t the same.

“I think we can call it a day. Find a nice place and go early to sleep.” Harry had the best ideas. He was very wise. “It’s not like we have to go back to Chillington.”

“I like that, but there won’t always be conveniently empty houses where we can hide.” Draco noted, crumpling the paper of his sandwich.

They stepped away from the shop and started to walk slowly but apparently purposefully down the main street of Diagon Alley. Until they found a solution it was better to keep moving.

“Is it me, or are there an awful lot of reward posters with Draco?” asked Harry pointing at one of the side walls that had no less than four copies of the same poster with Draco’s face on it.

“Finally, I am given the recognition I deserve as instigator of change.”

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“Whatever you say, number four.” Hermione was still looking around for a good place to hide since she would rather not fly anymore or ever again.

“An awful lot” Harry went on “When did you have time to do all the things they say? Irreverent behaviour? Resisting arrest? Incitation to violence and anti-government conducts?”

The list of Draco’s crimes was long and oddly lacking on details. Who, exactly, had suffered lasting damage because of Draco? It sounded made up but if they were going to start inventing crimes, why this sudden interest in Draco (mere number 4) when Harry and Hermione had also made a lot of trouble?

“Even in this you can see the pureblood preference” said Harry in fake disgust.

“I don’t know why they had to use that picture” Draco was scowling at a picture of his fifteen year old self taken right after Umbridge created the Inquisitorial Squad. They could see Crabbe’s shoulder right next to Draco’s left ear. “I look terrible. I don’t like it.”

“I think you look fine” said Harry, whose judgement should not be trusted in this case.

“I look sad and constipated! They did this on purpose, you know. They chose the less flattering picture they could find.”

“Then it should be really hard to recognize you” Harry answered, leaning a bit against him. A touch
of hip and shoulder. He sighed. He shouldn’t sound so happy given how cold and windy it was.

“Come on, Draco. It’s just the most recent picture they have of you” said Hermione, voice of reason. This is why she was number three on the list. She threw less tantrums.

(However, that time when she discovered Dumbledore had played her had been epic and terrifying. No wonder he had died before she got a chance to confront him).

“I could send them one” Draco muttered, knowing that he wouldn’t do it but wishing he could. A picture in which he recognized his face, one in which he looked happy.

***

“I miss my children” Arthur said sadly as Percy sat in front of him with their drinks. The place was warm and it had long hours, so he could stay there for as long as needed.

“I am sure they miss you too” Percy said pleasantly. He couldn’t indulge much in caffeinated drinks so he relished each opportunity to have one.

“I wish I could see them.”

Percy took his father’s cup and a pen from his pocket. It had been a present from Hermione Granger years ago and he loved it. It was a pity he could not use it in the Ministry because it was the one single thing that made Percy’s life easier.

“I am not sure that they would be all too happy to see you at the moment” Percy said as he scribbled on the cup “seeing how you keep sneaking away and getting yourself in trouble, Mister Weasley.”

“The twins would laugh.”

“That they would do” Percy agreed. He put the pen back in his pocket and pushed the cup back to Arthur. “But I don’t think the others would find it funny how you endanger yourself.”

“Percy” said Arthur, his eyebrows going down. He was nursing the cup between his hands without really noticing it was there. “He would frown. Never liked breaking the rules that one.”

“Bit of a pompous twit” Percy said after taking a sip of his drink. He couldn’t really call it coffee, it was too poor and cheap a name. This drink had mocha flavour and milk foam and cinnamon dust over it and it was fantastic.

“Merlin, how I miss him” said Arthur. His voice was coming clearer now. When he had just been hit with the confundus he had sounded a bit more tremerous and jittery. “I love him so much.”

Percy said nothing. He stared at his father with his lips pressed in a tight line. He couldn’t say when was the last time someone had told him that they loved him. His mother had told him, for sure, but he was a quiet boy in a big family and it was easy for these words to get lost. It might be that he hadn’t heard it since he was eleven and taking the train to Hogwarts for the first time. He couldn’t remember if they had said it when he got his OWLs. They had congratulated him, he knew that, but then his mother had said that Ron and the twins should pay more attention to him and the twins had said their necks couldn’t possibly hold a head as big as Percy’s and then his mother had scolded them and someone else had done something and they all forgot about Percy.

Well, Charlie. In his second to last letter, Charlie had written “you know I love you, Perce” followed by some careful lines that came to say “I have no idea what in Helga’s Hell you are doing anymore.” Percy thought Bill might had written to Charlie, because suddenly he was a bit more pushy and
wanted to know more of Percy’s thoughts.

Percy was absolutely certain that the Department of Security was going through his post. He knew because one time, on a particularly bad day (two witches dead and ten arrests and he hadn’t been able to prevent it) he had written a letter to Charlie in which he told him about how horrible he felt and how dreary it all was. Nothing more. Not a word about seeing the future or making sure Ron and Ginny were safe, yet as he signed the letter he had a vision of his own arrest and Gibbons entering in his apartment with that same letter clutched in his left hand.

He had burned it and he had cried and he had given a considering look to a bottle of firewhisky that slept on his living room until he found a place for it. All of the Assistants to the Minister, Junior or Senior, had received one. A gift, a bribe, from some gentleman who wished them well and appreciated their efforts. He had taken it because he had to, because rejecting bribes was a dangerous act, an insult to the person offering and to all those who accepted it.

He had also thrown the whisky away, full of anger at Voldemort and the world and the fact that despite all he was doing he couldn’t even complain, he couldn’t vent, he couldn’t, he couldn’t, he couldn’t.

His last letter to Charlie had been curt and firm and back to the spiel he used to give during the year Fudge went insane. He didn’t expect any more letters from Charlie now and it was a pity because he cherished them, but he should know better than to ask Percy this way. Percy was still a Gryffindor and a redhead and a Weasley and he hadn’t taken the mark in his arm so he remained under suspicion even if he also had quite a lot of influence. Different departments, you see. Other than the new Aurors, the branded ones, everyone was under permanent investigation.

“I have to go, Mister Weasley.” He said at last, rising from his chair. “Take care and please do not get in so much trouble.”

Percy went back to the counter and bought a lemon and poppy seed muffin for his father. He put it before him in silence and then he left the café without another word.

***

Arthur Weasley woke with a jolt. He hadn’t really been asleep. He knew his eyes were open yet he still had the sensation as if he were waking up. Slowly he started to notice the drone of conversations around him. He was holding a very interesting tall white cup in his hands which, on further inspection, had about two fingers of lukewarm coffee.

What a funny little thing. The texture was incredible. It felt like paper yet it held liquid and he had never seen something quite like it. As he turned it on his hands he saw there was something written on the surface (of course, paper!).

This one is on me, Mr. Weasley, and I will buy you as many as you want if only you stop being reckless—G.

Arthur stayed for a little while looking at the people and the décor and even the menu with the same enjoyment and attention as if he were in a museum. He took one of the plastic stirrers with him before finally leaving to go face Molly and Moody. Also, regardless of what Galahad said, something had to be done about Tonks.

***

Once again Narcissa saw as a girl, a young woman, dragged herself across the garden. It was not as
cold as the other time. She could see Elisia standing there, her feet buried in the earth and her face up to get the small rays of the sun. She did not move as Nymphadora went by her side. Elisia hardly seemed to notice anything that went around her these days.

Soon the shadow of the house would reach her spot. Narcissa should go and get her, take her to the roses by the entrance. Elisia would get some good three or four hours of sun there. She seemed to enjoy the sun.

She would make sure that the broom shed was properly locked as she went down. Burlock and Yaxley never bothered taking their brooms there, they just left them hanging wherever they dismounted. They were the kind of people who kicked their shoes against the wall as they entered their house and left them there for everyone to trip on them. It would be their fault. Theirs and Eric Avery’s who had gone down to the cells even when he was told not to. He had gone down because he wanted to rape the girl before Bella arrived and formally laid claim to her.

(Not even the news of the Dark Lord’s gift had managed to bring Bella back from London. Supposedly she was busy with the hunt of Draco and Sirius. Narcissa thought there must be something else.)

The girl had fought back. She had fought back and Narcissa wasn’t sure what she had done, she was not going down to check any time soon. Maybe she had killed him or maybe she had only injured him and let him there but she had taken his wand. She had also gone through the library to take note of the plans laid there and Narcissa could only admire her commitment to the mission. Most people would have just ran out of there and forgotten about everything else.

Maybe she would bring a book and read to Elisia, see if the words awoke her. It would be nice to sit in the sun by the roses and read. It didn’t count as speaking if she was reading someone else’s words.
The comfort of a storm

Hogwarts had never been the warmest of places and they were now in winter as hard as it was to believe. It was cold. Cold enough that unless you were actively engaged in melting the bones of a person with pleasure and blowing them out of their mind, going to bed required extra layers of clothes. It was a pity, because Severus liked very much the image of a certain werewolf wearing nothing but a pair of discardable boxers to his bed.

A pyjama clad werewolf was also acceptable as long as he still went to his bed. His. That was a thought that brought warmth and a feeling like a hug, just as being invited to Remus’ bed had always made something to Severus’ insides. It all boiled down to being wanted. What a wonderful and addicting feeling it is to know that you are wanted and, in this case, loved.

Severus should get up and get something to wear too. He could already feel the tip of his nose going cold. But he was unable to, on account of being currently boneless and extremely well shagged.

“Severus?” Called Remus from the dresser.

“Yes.”

“Why do you have a dozen unopened packages of tights?”

Severus craned his neck to see Remus had four of said packages in his hands. One pair was in a box with a blue ribbon still on top of the lid and the others in envelopes. Severus let his head fall back in the pillow as he considered his answer.

“Would it be alright if they were open?” He said at last in a calm tone, calm and smooth like butter because currently Severus was all soft and had no joints.

“Well, yes.” Remus said in that tone of his when he thought something was very obvious and he could not understand why someone would try to complicate it. The “we don’t have to have sex if you are tired” tone. The “I understand you are busy, funnily enough I keep up with the news, don’t fret about it” tone. The first few times Severus had heard it, it had been almost painful. Such understanding invited a vulnerability that, Severus knew, could also bring a lot of hurt. But such is the nature of love, to let yourself open to the possibility of pain.

However, this was not the case. Remus was asking his- yes, his boyfriend,- about the clearly feminine tights in Severus’ possession and apparently it did not merit even a shadow of surprise or appallement.

“That would make sense.” Remus waved with the hand holding the closed and sealed envelopes. “But why keep buying more if you are not using them?”

Remus was probably the only person to ever ask that question. The only one.

“Misdirection.”

Remus looked down at the tights. “Oh! I see. Very clever.” That said, he put the tights back in the drawer and closed it, opening the one below and getting the sleeping shirt and soft trousers he had been looking for.
Severus found he could not take his eyes away from him, enthralled by the line of his back and the angle of his hip as he closed the drawer. “So, if you had discovered that I had them for my personal use…” he prompted.

“I would be surprised because I have never seen any signs of this preference” Remus said as he put on the shirt. The worst thing, and the very best thing, was that Remus was being perfectly honest.

Remus, this Severus knew well, had never gotten much experience in sexual matters, something that Severus was always happy to remedy. There had never been a time in Remus’ life when he got so used to having a lover by his side that he felt he could experiment and introduce new things in the bedroom. Yet Remus was—well, Severus didn’t know if he was extremely kinky or utterly kink-less but in any case he didn’t seem surprised by anything and he accepted everything. The Most Adventurous Virgin, so to speak.

How Severus loved him. He was blessed by having him in his life.

“It’s a pity that no one is using them” Remus went on, coming back to bed. “Don’t you have anyone you could give them to?”

“No” Severus said quickly as he was hit in the chest with some clothes, because of course Remus had brought him some. “And I am perfectly aware that you are being facetious right now.”

Remus snorted and smiled the wolf smile, the one that made bellies everywhere tingle.

“You could give them to Lovegood” he insisted nevertheless, probably because he enjoyed seeing Severus frowning. Maybe that was his kink after all, seeing how his eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Think about what you just said.”

“True. She seems to favour stripped socks.” He made a pause letting the thought of Lovegood vanish. Not that Severus trusted him. Remus, like the hunter, liked to let you think you were safe so you would take your guard down. “How about Sirius? Do you mind if I give them to him?”

Remus laughed long and hard at Severus’ disturbed yet controlled expression. In case anyone ever wondered why and how those two became friends, it was for things like this. “Not for his use. He will give them to McGonagall.”

Severus hesitated. “As much as enjoy my rivalry with Minerva, sometimes I feel bad for her.”

***

Minerva had put a swift end to the competition for Most Mischievous Student Ever by naming Potter (Harry) and Weasley (Ron) the ultimate and unsurpassable winners. (“I mean it, don’t even think about trying to take their place, unsurpassable I said.”) She stood by her judgement because Harry was giving her headaches even in absentia and although Ronald grumbled a little bit that “he didn’t do nothing” there was not much force behind it. Minerva didn’t know exactly what Ronald had done or not done, but she would glare at him as if she knew and the boy looked guilty enough.

At this point, she wouldn’t even be that surprised if he turned out to be an animagus too. He had kept quiet about Severus’ involvement with Harry and he casted protegos nonverbally, so who knew what else he could do.

She should look into it. She should. But she had no chance to think much about Ron Weasley who was being very helpful this year and not giving her any trouble to begin with. No chance, because those idiots were apparently dissatisfied with the quick end to their competition and they had created
a new one to fill the vacuum.

“A woman as high and noble as you couldn’t possibly be loved as she deserves by just one man, for how could a single chest store so much emotion?” Said Fred, or maybe George, as Minerva walked past ignoring them on her way to her second class of the day. Just the second, take note, and already she had to deal with this.

“Truly t’is only us that could do justice to such a high lady.” Added the other twin, one hand over his heart and the other extended dramatically after her.

She had had warning. Trelawney tried to tell her and she didn’t listen and now Sirius and the twins had, for reasons that escaped everyone, moved into the equally glorious and honourable race for Minerva’s favour. This, at least, was something she was more used to, even if she hadn’t had to turn suitors away in decades. It was annoying but less dangerous for the rest of the castle so she bore it with patience. Besides, unlike with a prank war, they couldn’t throw in all their energy. In mischief Filch was their default enemy and Filch wasn’t good for anything so they could get away with a lot. In this, however, they risked awaking the ire of Pansy Parkinson who took harassment very seriously, so they had to check themselves.

“Avast you villains.” Sirius turned the corner like the best Shakespearean actor would enter a stage. “My lady’s name is that of wisdom and she shall not suffer your foolish speech. Indeed only those whose minds camper high, like the aether and the tower spire, those whose very name is written in the stars, shall know the glory of winning her favour.”

That said, Sirius proceeded to mock fight the twins, hitting them repeatedly with a glove.

“That is enough, Black. Quit it”

“Ah! Your cruel words hurt me like a spear thrust upon mine chest, yet to know that this scorn is directed at me is a gift that I shall prize. For your contempt, as it comes from your lips, becomes the sweetest balm for my ears, knowing that for a second you held my image in your mind.”

Three Ravenclaws girl started to clap. Sirius beamed at them before quickly directing his attention back to McGonagall and speaking about exchanging tokens of love.

Minerva looked at Remus who was just coming from teaching his class. She looked at him not pleadingly, precisely. She did not look pleadingly at all, more like demanding that he put his friends in check. Responsible and Mature Friend, do your job.

“Do not look at me” Remus said, in his very male and very adult voice. Not the voice of someone joking. He smiled just a little bit, like the edge of a knife. “I don’t know that I could resist the force of your eyes.”

Dear Merlin.

“I am a wolf, Minerva. And those cow eyes of yours…”

Why.

***

Avery Jr. was dead. His father was very angry. So were Voldemort and Bella.

Narcissa wasn’t. She was not happy about it, what a horrible thought! No. But she wasn’t exactly upset either. There was this feeling of disconnection from all of it and the most she could get was a
“he brought it on himself” which she was sure was not an emotion. But really, the girl was a Black. Not in name, certainly. Not before the law, since she was the female spawn of a disinherited female. But she was a Black in blood. Like Sirius, like Bella. What did they expect? What had Avery expected?

Of course Narcissa didn’t say any of that. She didn’t say anything. She put on a black and green coat over her usual white dress when they went to attend the funeral. A concession to Gaspar Avery who was mad with grief. She kept the white though because it was hers and she wasn’t discarding it for a stupid boy. It might have been an insult and it might have been dangerous, an act that spoke of too much dissidence, but she was not the only one. Bella was dressed in turquoise, turquoise, and the Dark Lord had smiled at her when he saw her in that dress and kept her hanging from his arm for the rest of the day.

It had been the girl’s fault for fighting back and daring to hurt and kill a proper pureblood wizard. There was no doubt about that and they had already called for her death. But that didn’t erase Eric’s fault, going against the Dark Lord’s explicit words and being stupid about it. He would be buried as was proper but no one should pay him too many respects.

His father, however, was already calling for revenge and saying he would go get the girl himself. Yaxley had volunteered to help him because Yaxley had also been punished for his participation in the girl’s escape. It wasn’t very visible, but there had been some form of amputation for having let his broomstick in the open waiting to be snatched.

Well, Bella’s curse wasn’t visible, although everybody was talking about it. The Dark Lord had thought that while that was a good penalty, the rest of the deatheaters could do with a more permanent reminder of what their failures could bring them. Voldemort was quite sure that there was no other dark wizard rising to power in Europe. There simply was no way people could keep such a secret away from him. Still, it didn’t hurt to give everyone a reminder of their sworn allegiance to him, the importance of the cause, and his own power, just in case they were paying too much attention to those rumours and getting ideas.

Well, it hurt Yaxley, but he hardly needed the left side of his face.

Lucius wanted to talk with Snape as he always did. He liked his wife to be silent but he drank Snape’s voice and words. However he barely got to exchange a few words because Snape was invited to stand by the Dark Lord’s right hand. Bella didn’t even pout when she heard, opting for pressing her chest against their lord’s arm instead and drinking on the pleased smile he sent her way.

There was something about Bella, Narcissa knew, a sudden apprehension. No one would know it was there but Narcissa had known her since they were children. She recognized the same unease line in her mouth from when Bella went out and lost her virginity before marriage and tried to keep it secret from their parents. It was very rare for Bella to feel like she had done something wrong and experience guilt.

Not that the Dark Lord seemed to have noticed. Narcissa had no way to know but she guessed that Bella’s thoughts were loud and hot like the roar of a fire and a small pebble of guilt would hardly draw any attention. She doubted that the Dark Lord wanted to spend much time in Bella’s mind. Her company and her body was another thing, but not her mind.

Narcissa looked at Snape who was giving Bellatrix his usual look of quiet judgement and bemusement as if he couldn’t believe that such creature could exist. Of course, he was no one to judge, no matter how proper he might look now all dressed in black. He had once been as desperately in love as Bella was.
He envied her. Narcissa knew he had envied and hated her. The delightful irony was that she envied him too. She envied the power he still had over Lucius, she envied the obvious preference Lucius always had for him. And she envied his love, because Narcissa had never loved someone like that. She hadn’t loved her husband like he did.

She loved her son, but that was a different kind of love. It was a love like a mountain, a love of ice and stone. A love that was hard and durable and unnoticed. Nothing at all like the sweet hot passion shared between lovers.

She looked at him now because it was better than looking at her sister preening and dressed in turquoise, and looking at either of them was much easier than looking at the Dark Lord. Snape was not a handsome man. He was not ugly, but his nose was too big, his skin too pale for the dark shade of his hair and eyes. His figure in general was narrow and pointy and nothing like Lucius or the young Mulciber or any of Narcissa’s cousins.

Yet he was sought and favoured both by Lucius, who was an objectively attractive man, and by the Dark Lord himself. He was nothing like the beauty hanging from the Dark Lord’s left arm, yet he was offered his right hand.

She must had been thinking too loudly. The Dark Lord looked straight at her, his red eyes flashing like embers. Narcissa allowed a wave of sorrow to surge forward. Oh, why wasn’t she like either of them? What did she lack that she couldn’t please her lord or her husband?

Voldemort looked away, bored already. It was too common a thought. If he had noticed it, it was because there had been and unusual complexity in Narcissa’s thoughts. Accidental, most likely. The result of a small housewife who kept poking at the same thoughts hour after hour. That’s why she had managed anything of depth. There resided the answer she sought, too. She was proper and obedient and boring and she had nothing of the allure of Voldemort’s two favourites.

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Remus understood that Severus didn’t like showing much affection in public, and it didn’t bother him. Severus had spent sixteen years undercover lying about some thing or another and he was currently the Headmaster of the school and had to keep a certain dignified air. Of course he avoided showing in public any kind of emotions whatsoever other than a quiet judgmental air.

The problem wasn’t that. Not that it was a problem at all. The difficulty, so to speak, was that Severus was so very committed to propriety that he refused to be dragged behind a curtain so he could be thoroughly smooched after saying something funny or doing something kind.

No, really, the way he treated Lovegood, the respect he gave her, the demands… People saw her as odd and dreamy and crossed her out unconsciously, but Severus had her taking notes and running errands and treated her like an adult and somehow the girl responded. She was still dreamy and still odd but if she didn’t end up heading a department in the Ministry or managing her own business chain Remus would be very surprised.

But to the point, he would like to kiss Severus right now and apparently the space behind curtains, armours, little visited corridors and empty classrooms were not acceptable even though they were out of sight. Neither were offices unless the door was double locked.

Perhaps he was right about the corridors because Hogwarts had seen a significant increase of population, and ever since the opening of the houses everybody kept moving freely. The number itself probably wasn’t that much higher than usual, refugees making up for the muggleborns who couldn’t return, but there certainly was quite a lot of traffic. All the adults wanted to make themselves
useful and there was this feeling of anticipation and wanting to be ready.

Still, smooching. Remus needed to smooch Severus urgently.

After the week, as they were referring to it, the chaos generated had been so big that Voldemort could not spare an hour to come check Hogwarts himself, nor was he in the mood to send anyone in his place. But a few days later Severus had been summoned to give a detailed report of the indoctrination in Hogwarts. It was mostly to assuage Voldemort’s fears and because it pleased him to hear that someone was actually performing his job well.

Today’s meeting had gone well. Severus would tell him more later, but it had probably gone well. After all, Voldemort wanted to believe the lies Severus told him. That in itself was cause enough for Remus wanting to snog. Just because Severus made it almost ordinary it wasn’t any less amazing how well he could lie to the Dark Lord’s face. Voldemort suspected nothing and the combination of Severus’ complaints about the Carrow’s impulsiveness and lack of class, together with the fabricated reports of Alecto Carrow whining about Severus stifling her artistic expression, worked wonderfully.

However, as it had also become sort of habitual, Severus had returned with a few refugees. A man and two women looking ragged and bone tired, although if Remus looked closer it seemed that it was just one woman, a bright eyed woman, and a boy and a girl. Old enough to fight, old enough to be chased and arrested and hurt, but to Remus still children, probably around Harry’s age and far too young to be touched by war.

The boy in particular seemed to have taken the worst of it. His face was bruised and stained with blood and he was keeping his left arm very close to his body. He was only wearing a t-shirt and stripped pyjama bottoms, one of the legs rolled up. He was so tired, so profoundly exhausted, that he couldn’t even bring himself to roll it down his calf. He was also barefoot and if he was standing at all it was because the girl next to him had a supporting arm around his back.

“Lovegood” called Severus as soon as he crossed the doors, followed by the woman who was looking at everything with an assessing eye.

“Yes, professor. Madam Pomfrey for medical attention and either professor Sprout or professor McGonagall for housing.”

Luna Lovegood was wearing two different kinds of knee-high stripped socks and a green sweater with yellow puffs that were supposed to represent dandelions (made by her friend Millicent). She looked quite goofy. In fact, she looked stupid. But somehow Severus could see past the garish eyesore and notice the amazing brain behind. Luna only needed to be told something once and she remembered accurately and without mixing any details.

Just as Remus had the twins helping him, Severus had Luna. Only in their case it was quite different and not just because of the clash of clothing styles.

“I will also tell professor Flitwick” Luna went on. However, instead of running up the stairs she went towards the new arrivals, coming to a stop next to the girl. The poor girl had the lost gaze of those who had gone through a shock and she didn’t even register Luna’s presence. Her face, her beautiful baby doll face, was marred by the spidery black lines of a curse. Remus had a couple of ideas of what could have caused that mark and it was not the kind of hex you could simply walk off. Someone had been looking after that girl, protected her after she was hit, saved her life.

Good.

She was wearing blue cotton tights, torn on the knees, that looked way too thin for the current
weather. Luna smiled gently and kissed her on the cheek, the right cheek with the black mark. “It is very good to see you, Cho” she said, hugging her briefly.

This seemed to jostle the girl out of her shock. She blinked and her eyes filled with tears as she turned to look at Luna.

“Come this way” Severus told them, ushering them towards the Great Hall where they would be fed. That was usually the first thing they did when they brought people back. “And Lovegood” he added over his shoulder. “Bring the match for this one, will you?”

“Of course, sir, right away.”

That was the thing with Severus and Luna: they didn’t speak English. Whatever they were doing, it was not English. It was Cryptic is what it was. Severus said something utterly devoid of meaning and context and somehow Lovegood always understood what she was supposed to do.

She ran up the stairs, her long sunflower blonde mane trailing behind, and they moved to the Great Hall.

They sat together, tired and silent. The woman with very bright eyes was directing the others to sit, to drink, to eat. Remus noticed she didn’t take anything for herself, too busy taking care of her group and looking around the room, scanning the hall for any threats. She didn’t have a wand, but she had barely been at the table for two seconds before one of the knives found its way to her pocket.

The young man took a cup full of water with both hands. His face was caked with dirt and dust and blood. The girl, Cho, stared at the piece of bread in front of her as if she had never seen one before and had no idea how to eat it. The woman quickly took the bread from her hands a put a bowl of soup instead.

The Great Hall was mostly empty at that time, but these days “mostly empty” still meant having half a dozen people around at the very least. The group tasked with improving the protego imbued cloaks liked to work there between meals since apparently the light was best.

For an hour, Severus and Minerva had feared that having the refugees there would become a problem. Too many empty hours during the day and too much trauma were a bad combination. For an hour, it seemed like there was nothing for them to do at the school and that they would simply hang around in the background, safe but tortured by their experience. Just for an hour. Then Philip or Julius, Remus couldn’t remember, had shaken himself and tentatively asked if he could make a suggestion for DADA class. They had all been out there, they had all seen what worked and what didn’t.

There was no Quidditch this year but they were giving extra flight lessons because nowadays, as Amanda had pointed out, broomstick flight was the only travel method that was not controlled. Remus was being very insistent with the expecto patronus and naturally many students, and even adults, were having trouble with it, so again they had extra classes in the evenings. Even the squibs were helping, carefully and methodically brewing potions or helping expand the greenhouses, because there was this terror, spread between all of them, of needing a healing potion and coming up empty.

Remus understood. It was the first and second years, and even the thirds and fourths. You looked at them, all those vulnerable children, and of course you came up with the compulsion to put them on a thick sweater and a cloak that would stop curses. It was probably why Severus made Luna recite the recipe for a powerful antidote forwards and backwards.
Just then, Luna returned with Madam Pomfrey and a Gryffindor boy who, as soon as he stepped into the Great Hall, let out a wail not unlike the one of a banshee. It was one of the worst sounds anyone had heard, as if in that cry the boy were letting out all the pain and fear and sadness he had been storing inside his chest for months.

He ran to the table, still screaming, and he didn’t so much hug the other boy, who had already gotten up in shaking legs, as he collided into him, both crashing to the floor and crying and crying.

“You are an idiot” Seamus managed to say between sobs. “Going away like that. You are an idiot, but you are my idiot and you can’t disappear ever again, I forbid it.”

“All right” the other boy, Dean, said very faintly from somewhere between Seamus’ arms and chest.

“No, I mean it. You can’t go.”

“Not going anywhere.” A promise, a promise of something else.

Severus had done that, even if he was now talking to Madam Pomfrey as if nothing out of the ordinary were going on not ten steps away from him. Severus, who pretended not to care, he had known and hadn’t wanted to delay that moment of happiness. Tomorrow Remus was going to test Finnigan again and he was sure he would produce and excellent *patronus*, but as for right now Remus just needed to take Severus’ stupid face between his hands and kiss him senseless.

“Are you free right now?”

“I am Headmaster of this school.”

“I know, but-”

“And you are teaching arguably the most important subjects in their lives and your class starts in twenty minutes.”

“I could be done in fifteen.”

“No.”

“Fred can start without me. We can do a practical exercise today.”

“Remus, no.”

“Fine, I will see you before dinner, then.”

Severus argued some more, but after the last official lesson was done, he went to look for Remus himself and they kissed in his office for twenty minutes before they both had to go attend something else.

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While Harry escaping from Voldemort’s clutches twice was good, excellent even, and the misdirection created in Hogwarts was also good, the chaos generated was not. True, the fire in the mudblood registry was a good thing, names and names that became safer as they burned. But the Ministry couldn’t let these series of calamities go unanswered.

They stopped pretending.

They did not make up excuses anymore to arrest people, to lock them, to kill them. They simply did.
Some said that they had started attacking muggles and the only reason why they were not going to open war against them yet was because they were too busy fighting against the Irish government.

It wasn’t until they had consumed the first dish at dinner that Dean and Cho seemed to start waking up. In Cho’s case it meant that she started to cry, overwhelmed by the familiar vision of students sitting down to dinner. Luna sat by her side, caressing her hair and giving her water from time to time so she wouldn’t dehydrate, and let her cry. It was very important to let people cry.

They had arranged a transport to the continent, Cho said. They had been planning it for weeks with the help of some wizards and witches that used to be Aurors and called themselves the Order of the Phoenix. They had already successfully gotten a ship out back in September. Only this time someone had spoken too much and word got out. They had been attacked while they waited in an abandoned farmhouse. Dean hadn’t hesitated, jumping down and getting in front of Cho when she was hit. Aurora had followed suit and together they had gotten Cho up and they had kept the deatheaters at bay long enough for everyone else to be able to leave once the portkey was activated.

They had left without them, which was the sensible thing to do and what they had all agreed beforehand. They had left and Aurora, Dean and Cho stayed and fought for their lives. Cho had casted *glacio* on herself, which cancelled the worse effects of the curse long enough that she could join the fight and provide Dean with much needed support. They had run. Aurora casted a *bombarda* that took two snatchers down and gave them enough of a cover that they could get away. Still, they knew they couldn’t get very far away, not when there was three confirmed deatheaters (marks on their arms and silver masks with them) and eight more Ministry wizards plus a couple werewolves chasing them. They had come expecting to capture twenty people, the blood of the three of them would be barely enough to satisfy them.

And that’s when the miracle happened. There was the pop of an apparition, very soft and muted which meant it was excellently executed, and standing before them was a figure dressed in silver. Really, Cho didn’t need to say anything else for everyone to know who it was and, wasn’t that unbelievable? It was so rare for someone to actually get to see him!

“Kneel” Galahad had said with a voice as soft as English rain and Cho had dropped to her knees immediately. He had raised his left arm (and that in itself was a queer and uncanny vision, wielding the wand with the left hand), and something black and sticky, like a piece of nightmare, erupted from it and engulfed the three closest snatchers.

He had extended his hand then, the right one, the hand of light, and they all grabbed it tightly and before they knew it they had disappeared and reappeared in an abandoned church in the middle of nowhere where Severus Snape found them not twenty minutes later.

There were some ooohs and aaahs and some questions about how Galahad looked because none of them had actually gotten to see his face, which was generally accepted to be strikingly handsome although perhaps scarred in all the right ways. However, all they could say was that his cloak and his boots were misty grey. Cho was sure that he was very tall and lean and she didn’t want to say right away in public but the implication was that she also thought him extremely hot. More details to come later when they weren’t in the Great Hall.

“Wow. I can’t believe you were rescued by Galahad himself. No one ever gets to see him in person.”

There was a small pause as everyone chewed on their food and reflected on the wonderful mystery that was Galahad.

“That must have been the greatest rescue ever.” Said Colin Creevey with his still high pitched voice. At least he didn’t sound like he could break glass anymore. “I can’t imagine a bigger surprise.”
“Actually-” Dean hadn’t spoken much because he was hungry and it was very difficult to eat when you had three Gryffindor boys insisting on hugging you at the same time. Seriously, he had Ron’s chin resting over the top of his head while Seamus and Neville hugged his waist and chest. “This summer, I kid you not, I have witnesses, this summer I was almost murdered and I was saved by Draco and Harry and that was the weirdest experience of my whole life. Hermione came later.”

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They had to allow Seamus to come with Dean while they interviewed him. Dean spoke with Seamus’ arms around his waist and his head in his lap and when he told them how close he had been to dying Seamus closed his eyes tight with pain and held Dean closer.

Kreacher had failed to tell them about Draco and Hermione doing magic without wands, and there certainly had been no mention whatsoever about human-to-tree transformation.

Remus and Severus exchanged the International Parental Look of Disavowal. The one that started with “your son/daughter” followed by whatever action had been done and some elucubration as to who had taught the kid to do that. It goes: “Look at what your son did. He didn’t get it from me.”

“Yaxley was the only one to return from that encounter” Severus explained “and his account was quite different.”

Yaxley’s version had way more wizards in it, Remus Lupin breaking people’s necks and Alastor Moody making the earth shake. There had been no one else to refute it so they had had to accept that Yaxley was the only one to survive an ambush set by the old Order.

That’s it, until the last Hallow’s Eve when Elisia and Montgomery had wandered into a muggle town. Elisia and Montgomery who were supposed to be dead. True, they didn’t seem very alive at the moment, but their presence casted doubt over Yaxley’s version. Unfortunately they could not give their own version of events because neither of them had managed to say a word since they were found. For the most part they just stood in place in a sunny spot.

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As soon as the gargoyle slid back in place, Remus took Severus’ arm and pulled him into a kiss that was going to be shallow and brief but that soon increased in intensity and had them standing there like fools for minutes.

They did not kiss as they were going up the stairs because they were both grown-ups with responsibilities and there was no reason to risk a fall. But as soon as they were in the landing, Remus kissed Severus again. He put his hand on Severus’ nape, making sure that his arm offered enough back support that he could march Severus backwards across the office without fear of tripping and without interrupting the kiss. Remus’ free hand was making a rude gesture (dear Merlin, who would have thought that of Lupin?). For the most part the portraits of former Headmaster and Headmistress remained asleep and the one that didn’t and insisted in sharing his opinion would know to keep quiet.

They kissed all the way to the bedroom.

Once there, Remus went down on his knees swiftly and got Severus in his mouth. There is always quite a rush of emotion when you have a werewolf’s head, a werewolf’s mouth, right there between your legs. There is always that involuntary fear that can become very exciting. And then there is a time when the fear is gone, replaced by trust and affection, and that is even more arousing. It is the wild beast that you know won’t hurt you because you are that special, it is the wild beast tamed by your scent.
Or in this case not beast, but Remus, wonderful, glorious Remus who insisted on loving Severus despite all the good reasons why he shouldn’t. Severus had stopped voicing those reasons aloud because the last time he did he had made Remus angry, truly angry, and he had felt a sharp pain in his chest from seeing him like that. That had been back when they had Harry and a cottage and they lived in a time and world of their own. He had almost brought back all of those old reasons plus the new ones he had found during the terrible interval without Remus, but Remus had made it clear he wouldn’t hear a word of it and then he had been kissing him so Severus spoke of something else.

These days, even in the middle of a war and with their child hiding and in danger, Severus still didn’t mention the reasons why Remus shouldn’t be with him, not even to himself. That was the surprising part. At some point he had stopped listening to his own thoughts and instead brought Remus’ voice to his mind.

Remus.

“Can we…?”

Remus leaned back, letting him slip out of his mouth. He rested his head against Severus’ leg and smiled and, truly, it was the most beautiful thing Severus had ever seen. His smile and his hair and his brown and green eyes that held the light and the spirit of the forest.

“Whatever you want” he said. It was that easy, that open.

“Then I want this to last” Severus said, because today had been a pretty good day.

Remus got up and took his hand, pulling him along to bed, and silly, silly, Severus. Always so careful with his words and what he said and what he thought and ten minutes with him and he lowered all his defenses and he stopped thinking. He said whatever he wanted with no second thought for the consequences.

Remus made it last indeed. By the end of it (probably the end of it) when he came for the third time, Severus was exhausted and sweaty, so sweaty. He had a cramp on his hand from grabbing the sheets too tight, sheets that were now wet and too hot, just like him. His hair was matted and wet and his belly and his legs were covered in lube and come and he felt so dirty and gross.

Remus lay by his side still breathing fast. Not only werewolves had more strength, it had become evident they also had more stamina because Remus was winded but he was far from being utterly exhausted like Severus was and he had been doing quite a lot of the work.

Remus took Severus’ face in both hands and kissed him, long and shallow, a good sweet kiss. Severus was still tired and covered in sweat (his and Remus’) and saliva (both again) and come (yep, both) but with that kiss he felt, for a moment, as if he were one of the most precious and delicate creatures in the world, something gentle and expensive and worthy.

They did little else that night, just the most basic clean up before falling asleep still intertwined in each other. In the morning they woke up reasonably early and since Severus was going to take a long and thorough shower Remus said they might as well… and this is how Severus found himself laying on his back in a nest of ruined sheets and with a very handsome man riding him. Outside there was a winter storm coming, the thunder or the wind must had woken them. Severus moved his hands up the length of Remus’ thighs to his hips and he looked into his eyes and thought that he was a very lucky man, such treasure he held in his hands. Remus looked down at him and smiled and Severus knew he understood, but just in case he told him so, words of warmth and velvet whispered in his ear. Severus thought that Remus could always do with another declaration of affection. He had thought for too long that no one would ever dare loving a werewolf and it was now Severus’ happy
responsibility to remind him that it was quite the opposite. And since he was up there, smelling his
hair and whispering in his ear, he could tell him about his eyes and his smile and about how warm
and tight and big and soft and hard he was. How beautiful.

It started to rain heavily. Thunder and rain that made a drowning noise against the windows. A noise
that almost drowned their sighs and their gasps and the rustle of the sheets. They finished and
cleaned up and Severus had breakfast delivered to them because it was one of those mornings. They
still had time before classes began, they could go down to the Great Hall for breakfast, but they could
also spend that time in here together.

Severus had never thought of it much but he liked watching Remus drinking hot drinks. He liked
seeing him in warm sweaters and eating hot meals and he just really, really, liked seeing him not
being cold. He had looked so cold and sick when he came back to Hogwarts to hunt Pettigrew.

But this was something he had felt before that. Some desire to see him taken care of.

Something must had shown in his face, or maybe it was the storm that was making it feel like night
even though it was day. (And night and darkness worked better for them). Remus looked at him, a
steaming mug held between his hands.

“Do you think you would want to get married?” he said “I think I would like to marry you.”

That soppy sentimental idiot man. Severus’ heart did something in his chest. His heart had never
done such acrobatics as it did with Remus. Before Remus, it had certainly beaten fast with passion
and lust and something like love, and it had been crushed and broken. With Remus, however, it
leaped and jumped and danced.

“We already live together and have raised a child. Marriage doesn’t seem like much of a
compromise.”

“Sure, most people do it in a different order. But nevertheless. Would you like to?”

Severus thought about it. This was a very new line of thought. He had never thought about marriage
for himself. The one and only time he did he had been informed that he would never be more than a
mistress, never to occupy the legitimate position of a pureblooded woman who could provide a heir
and social standing and quite a nice dowry. Severus was to be on the sidelines of a marriage, never in
one.

He leaned forward and captured one of Remus’ hands while he thought about it, lest Remus felt
rejected. That would terrible, no.

“No” he said at last “I don’t think so.”

“No?” Remus sounded surprised, and his hand jumped a little bit but he didn’t pull it away from
Severus’ grasp. He knew by now that Severus looked at everything differently.

“There would be a ceremony” Severus informed. He was quite sure he was on to something here.
“People would be invited. I don’t have any friends, it would look sad and uneven.”

“Of course you have friends!” Remus was already gearing to defend Severus’ honor from himself.

“And” Severus pressed on Remus’ hand slightly to indicate this was his big argument. “You would
of course want Black to be your best man”

“Well, yes, I could not think of anyone else. He is my best friend, you know that, and he would want
to be there. He has been very supportive.”

It’s not as if Remus hadn’t noticed the effort both Sirius and Severus had been making to learn to like each other.

“He would make a speech, Remus. He would make a speech. I am not subjecting myself to Black’s best man speech.”

The only reason why Sirius’ speech at James and Lily’s wedding wasn’t remembered as a historical moment of cringe was because James had been even worse.

“… I see your point, but if we eloped he would never forgive me.”

“He would still appear in the chapel in time. I know he would.”

Remus smiled.

“You know, he probably would.” He rose from his seat and gave Severus a quick and light kiss on the lips. “I am still marrying you. You have my permission to look as sour and bitter as you want during his speech.”

“Oh?”

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The storm went on. Dark skies and a loud thunder that made for a wonderfully dramatic background.

“Back off, Black. Do not sully our lady with your presence.” Called George from the other side of the corridor. There was a big window behind him and he cut a nice figure against it. He had been taking tips from someone. Most likely Sirius himself.

“Villains! What is the meaning of this?” said Sirius automatically while Minerva desperately tried to hide any signs of relief. Black had looked like he was about to give her one of those pairs of expensive tights Severus had warned her about. The interruption was most welcomed.

“The Ministry himself has spoken and the word is spread across the land” yelled Fred, waving a piece of parchment and coming from behind a suit of armour. Never let it be said that the twins didn’t take an opportunity to increase the drama.

“You are called undesirables, Sirius Black.” Said George like one would say Stormcrow, Herald of Woe. “Undesirable in this kingdom, second only to one.”

“Really?” Sirius asked breaking character and looking quite excited about the news.

Indeed. Apparently Aurora, the woman who had come yesterday with Dean and Cho, had kept in her pocket a Ministry issued poster with a list of the ten worst undesirables.

“Number two, Black?” said Minerva, relishing the opportunity to use her mocking disappointed tone. “Now, I think this settles it. If you can’t be number one, then I won’t even consider it.”

“The lady has spoken!” cried Fred and George in unison. They immediately started a weird interpretative dance of celebration in which they used their wands to shoot sparkles.

“Although I see that Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley are also featured. Sharing a space, too. Could not even merit their own number.”
True, the twins had won ex aequo the position number ten, just right after Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt. They were quite pleased with it, despite the relatively low classification. Just getting in the top ten was an honour. If anything, the fact that Moody was number nine was the real head-scratcher here.

“Oh, dear” said Ron, who was coming from Charms class, because of course Minerva always had to deal with this nonsense early in the morning. “I don’t think that I could keep trying to romance anyone after this. It’s really embarrassing.”

Ronald was an excellent student assistant. The knight that would come out of nowhere to take your bishop.

“Shut up Ronny, you aren’t even on the list.”

“Because I am discreet and they don’t know what I get up to, but if they did I would certainly not be four positions behind Cedric Diggory.”

“How could he be sixth?” Fred whispered despondently. “He always seemed so nice. What did he do?”

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For once, the meeting had been brief. Kreacher said that Harry and the others believed that Voldemort had hidden a horcrux in Hogwarts. Dumbledore said that Tom had always been obsessed with the school and dreamed of becoming a professor first and eventually Headmaster, so it was not impossible that he had chosen to leave a piece of his soul there. He was glad that despite everything Harry was still following the plan.

“I will cut the stones to which your painting is attached and I will chuck the whole thing in the lake.”

Flitwick did not look like he could hold the Headmaster’s portrait, let alone the wall from which it hang, but he spoke as if he had already researched the spell he would need and behind him Minerva looked like she would claw the painting out with her own two hands.

Dumbledore did not apologize, but he abandoned Gracus Deerheart portrait and went back to his own.

It was agreed that they should at least consider the possibility of there being a horcrux in Hogwarts and start a search. The twins plus Sirius and Remus would revisit some of the old hiding spaces and if they didn’t find anything right away they would share the information with the school, emphasising the importance of not touching the horcrux if found.

Then there would be the matter of destroying it, but they were all pretty confident they could do it. Dumbledore kept trying to explain how he conjured the fiendfyre underlining how unstable and dangerous it was (Flitwick had come close to demonstrating right there and then with Dumbledore’s portrait, because months ago Albus had asked him to cast some protective spells on an old dry fountain in one of the cloisters and now they knew why). After a lot of coughing and humming and saying he was just being a good friend and no one should get angry, Weasley (Ronald) had confessed that maybe there was a live basilisk still in the castle which also came to explain the mysterious recent discovery of a silver rat paw. So there was always the possibility of chucking the horcrux down the pipes and to the Basilisk’s mouth if it came to it.

In the end, they needn’t disturb the Basilisk.
It went like this: Neville, like much of the school, was wracking his brains thinking where the horcrux that Kreacher mentioned could be. He thought about that all the time.

He thought about it when he slept, when he bathed, when he ate and certainly when he walked back to the dormitories.

He was thinking about it now, as he took a slightly longer route to class because he didn’t want to come across Ernie McMillan. Would Neville hit Ernie? No. It had lost it flavour soon enough. But he didn’t want to talk to him or listen to him. So the longer route it was.

A door appeared when there hadn’t been any doors.

The child that Neville used to be, that child would have never opened a door that wasn’t there seconds ago. That child had been scared and hurting quite a lot. But Neville wasn’t that child anymore, not for a long time now. He had grown more than many adults can aspire to grow.

Sometime during his fifth year his body and his mind had said “enough” and Neville stopped caring and stopped being afraid. He had grown ten centimetres, as if the fear had been holding him down in more ways than one.

At the end of his sixth year, with Dumbledore’s death recent, he went by himself to Diagon Alley (blessed, blessed Knight Bus that took you anywhere if you couldn’t apparate yet) and he had bought himself a wand at Ollivander’s. A wand of his own, not his father’s. Neville had lived enough in the shadows casted by his ill parents. They didn’t want that kind of life for him.

That was not wishful thinking. He knew. His mother told him, again and again, she told him she wanted him to be happy.

Neville got his own wand and Grandmother had been angry. Not as angry as she had been after the riots, he thought, but somehow this fight was much worse. Neville looked at her with brown eyes, plain brown that never got a beautiful metaphor in books beyond “chocolate”. Maybe Neville’s eyes were like warm sweet chocolate or maybe they were like the earth and dirt that stored life or like the strong oak that had lived for centuries. They were his eyes in any case and they were firm and sure when he told her that he was grateful that she took care of him as a child, of course he was, but “you did a really poor job, Augusta.”

She had fed him and she had dressed him and she had also resented and punished him for not being the Auror his father had been. She did that since he was age one.

Neville didn’t yell back and he didn’t blow up things in his rage. He packed his things and left the house and the most satisfying thing he did was that he didn’t close the door behind him. He left it open, a physical testament to his lack of cares, and Augusta Longbottom was forced to go and close it which enraged her more than any slam of the door would.

He spent those crazy summer months at Zabini’s. His first choice had been The Burrow, but it had already been burned down. Zabini’s was fine, though. There were many other students living there and Mrs. Zabini was quite welcoming. She was not like Mrs. Weasley at all, though. She would not feed you any delicious and comforting foods and she didn’t knit (apparently the arm motion wasn’t aesthetically pleasing) but she would laugh and declare that you were not yummy but you were going to be and she taught you how to win at cards with barely any cheating.

No, really, no one should ever play cards with the children that spent the summer at her house.

It was a wonder that deatheaters hadn’t come to recruit her, but then again, she didn’t look
completely human. Not like she had goblin or troll or veela blood, more like she was a goddess in disguise and who wants to risk enraging that?

The point, in any case, was that Neville opened the door and stepped inside the Room of Requirements.

He took a look, rows upon rows of objects piling to the ceiling.

“Nope.”

He stepped back and closed the door.

His next class was Charms and he didn’t want to miss it, but Flitwick would understand.

Neville stepped away from the door until he saw it disappear and then he stepped closer and when he opened the door this time it took him to the library, probably because Neville was now looking for answers.

Twenty minutes Neville stood there, walking backwards and forwards until he got the first room back and he figured that the damned horcrux must be hiding there. But where?

There was a distinctive feeling of “For Merlin’s sake, kid” coming from the room the next time he opened the door. There was a window that hadn’t previously been there and the sunrays filtering through it fell over an old marble bust with a beautiful diamond and sapphires tiara on it.

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“Professor Snape, I broke something.”

“I don’t care” Snape answered lighting quick. Then he paused for just a second and tensed in preparation for bad news. “Was it something of mine?”

“No, sir.”

“Then I really don’t care.”

“I think it may have been an historical heirloom.” Neville went on.

“Did it have something to do with the unearthly sound that went through the castle filling with fear and despair all the unfortunate souls that heard it?”

“Black” Snape warned.

“I heard that too!” Luna said excitedly because it wasn’t every day that you heard an unearthly sound that went through the entire castle filling its unfortunate occupants with fear and despair. Professor Snape had made her a tisane to take away the fright.

“It may be, yes.” Neville admitted. The screech had been pretty loud.

There was a time when Neville had been terrified of professor Snape. But now there was only respect and yes, a bit of fear, but of a different quality. And ever since Snape started explaining a bit more about the ingredients used in Potions Neville had actually improved and he went from utter disaster to disappointingly below average. Considering where he had started it was a meteoric ascension.

“I will look into it, shall I?”
“You do that, Black.”

***

They met in the teacher’s common room. There was no Headmaster portraits there.

“He says he smashed it with a hammer” said Sirius, pointing at the little pieces of what had been a tiara, collected in a handkerchief. They were mostly sand, which gave the impression that Neville hadn’t just hit the tiara once, but had been going at it for a while and with much enthusiasm.

“Then it may not be—”

“Probably a special hammer. Goblin made or something. We all heard the shriek.”

It had certainly been very much like the sound of a piece of cursed soul departing the object from which it was attached. Not that anyone, other than Kreacher, had experience with that kind of sound, but somehow one could tell. The merfolk were still gathered around the underwater window in the Slytherin common room, asking with signs what was going on.

(The funny second year Hufflepuff was attempting to explain through pantomime.)

Sirius had also brought the hammer for inspection. Only it had shattered together with the tiara and all they had was a small and blackened piece of the handle with a few blurred runes on it. Professor Babbling kept looking at them and shaking her head. There was no conclusive identification.

“…and I found a scarf I had lost on my second year” Sirius went on, showing said scarf “and look at this! This is the spider web we made on our fourth year. It can block a medium sized corridor and hold up to five Slytherins and a small Hufflepuff at a time, we tried it when, um, when, uh, actually, never mind. Silly thing. I am sure Remus told us not to.”

…

“Please Severus, stop frowning at me like that.”

…

“Oh, you know what? Moony here helped with the design, so there is no need to blame just me. Frown at him too, will ya?”

“I am sure I was sick at the time” Remus said pleasantly when Severus, Minerva and Slughorn all turned to look at him. For a week, students and teacher had had to take a different route to Potions class while Filch tried to remove the spider web.

Chapter End Notes

Excellent rest stop here.
Notes: I warned before but I have to say again that I might not make the next weekly deadline. I say this here because the chapter kind of ends in a cliffhanger so you might want to click back and wait a few weeks for more updates. Or at least if you read forward, know what it entails. In any case, the story will be finished for sure. It’s a probable delay, not an interruption.

It is a sad and disheartening truth that very often the evils of this world don’t come from truly wicked people so much as they come from idiots. The idiots, the thoughtless, the ones who didn’t think that —, who didn’t mean to—, the ones who do the thing and ruin everything. Evil people plot. Idiots just ruin things.

This story features two such idiots.

Idiot number One was Lachlan Romasanta. Romasanta was a werewolf. This had little to do with his idiot status, no matter how much wizarding society wanted to believe that all lycanthropes were uneducated barbarians. Remus Lupin was an intellectual and scholar and Fenrir Greyback had quite a lot of smarts about him even if he chose to use them in the worst ways. Romasanta, however, was an idiot and his lack of studies only aggravated the problem. He also had troll and giant ancestry and, supposedly, he was a born werewolf rather than a turned one, which was extremely rare. How he had come to be was a mystery few wanted to investigate.

Romasanta was big and strong, perhaps bigger than Greyback and he was an amazing specimen. He was, as it is often the case with idiots, very comfortable with violence. Much as in the case of the Carrows, it was one of the few things in life he was good at. He had naturally come to follow Voldemort’s movement even if by all rights he should had been one of the first to be exterminated given his lineage. But, of course, he was very strong and good at following orders if they were phrased with short simple words and they had to do with breaking things or inflicting pain on someone. He was, in a word, useful, and those who were useful to the cause got a reprieve. In the end it wasn’t so much about cleaning the line but about being on top and making those below acknowledge that you deserved to be on top.

Romasanta had been in a band of snatchers for a long time, breaking doors and chasing people down as instructed by a polite and civilized deatheater called Thorton. It’s not wrong or violent if someone civilized tells you to do it because they know the difference better. Only said deatheater was currently recovering from his injuries after their last mission went a tiny bit wrong (nobody dead, but everybody injured with varied severity.) Romasanta had actually saved Thorton’s life, pulling him from a fire and taking a couple of curses meant to him, but that was little trouble for him. He healed quickly and he didn’t care much about pain anyway. Pain had been a constant in his life so even though he could feel it he hardly paid any attention to it, just as he didn’t think about breathing or how his tongue sat on his mouth. Pain was nothing.

What Romasanta was feeling acutely was the absence of a master, someone to give him orders. He was not so very stupid that he couldn’t see that he had to prove his usefulness constantly. Besides,
life was easier when he had someone to tell him what to do. Thinking for himself was full of possibilities for failure while orders were orders. You followed the orders and everything was fine. He had been following orders for a long time now.

He had, however, not kept current with the news. Not his fault. The news were complicated and they kept changing. He could hardly be expected to know what was happening around him. It was enough that he understood orders enough to carry them. Should he also know about consequences? Or about changing one’s opinion when new information was provided? About subtle games of power and influence? This was a man who thought that hitting someone with a wrench was already elaborate torture, how was he supposed to understand that sometimes people said one thing and meant another?

All he knew was that at some point, weeks and weeks ago, maybe months, Bellatrix Lestrange had made it known that she did not trust Severus Snape and that she would like more information about his actions in Hogwarts. Of course Bella wasn’t so careless as to say so explicitly, but there had been the implication that she would be very grateful, both with Amycus Carrow and with Peter Pettigrew, if they delivered anything that would ruin Snape. Lachlan Romasanta had paid attention to that. Mostly because Thorton had explained it to him using simple words.

He had not paid attention to how powerful and influential Severus Snape had become. A master move, considering he spent most of his time secluded in Hogwarts and therefore had little opportunity to play the intrigue games in Voldemort’s court. The fact that Snape was one of Voldemort’s favourites and most beloved servants went well over Romasanta’s head. Just as he had not paid attention to the very public change of attitude of Bellatrix towards Snape. Neither did he know that the topic of the moment, what people really cared about, was finding Tonks and learning what happened to Mulciber and getting revenge for the Averys deaths. That was like three different names. Too much.

More subtle things, like the rumours that there was a secret player, a knight dressed in mist and grey who didn’t play with the Order yet worked against Voldemort, were completely lost to him. People didn’t like to consider those rumours of a rogue element in any case. Thinking about his motivations and interests, about why that person was so independent, was too distressing.

So, despite Snape’s wonderful status and Bellatrix’s well known new interests, Romasanta didn’t think to try and capture Sirius Black by himself, or Nymphadora Tonks, or Kingsley Shacklebolt, or anyone from the top ten of the list, really. No, Lachlan Romasanta was an idiot and as an idiot he followed the months old request and decided to enter the impenetrable fortress in case he found some dirty laundry that Bellatrix would like to know about.

This was profoundly stupid, but what do you want? This is an idiot’s story.

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Idiot number Two was Ernie McMillan who, to this day, was convinced that he had been perfectly justified in his actions (family came first after all) and everyone else was being unnecessarily mean. He had tried this approach with the Slytherins first, citing that he had been threatened and didn’t have a choice and therefore he should not be ostracized. This only goes to show what kind of idiot Ernie was, even if his academic performance spoke otherwise, because you couldn’t just tell a Slytherin that there was no choice. Finding alternatives was their defining trait together with ambition. They had also all faced severe threats, to their families and from their families, many of them had been disinherited and they had spent a year thinking that Draco, their silver prince, had been murdered. They were not the best audience to talk about family pressure at the moment.

Ernie had spent the rest of his sixth year in Hogwarts in the infirmary. At first he had legitimate
causes to be there because he kept getting hexed (or punched in the face when Ginny was involved). Later he just cited a general ill feeling and Madam Pomfrey allowed him to stay because it was true that he could hardly show his face outside without someone insulting him at the very least.

He had returned to his seventh year with a bit more confidence. Dumbledore was dead, the Dark Lord was in power, and even if his family hadn’t reaped much benefit from Ernie’s little act, it was still more than most. He had been sure that soon people would come to him looking for his friendship and that many others would have to face a choice equally difficult. (Not that it was choice, no, Ernie had no other option). They would all realise how stupid and cruel they had been and how pointless it was to fight against people like Voldemort.

He had returned expecting them to apologize.

And then Snape, of all people, had turned out to be a rogue player and not a death eater at all, never mind the brand in his arm. Generally Ernie would glad about it, because he didn’t actually like Voldemort. It was just that he didn’t think they could win and they wouldn’t get anywhere by opposing him. It was better, he thought, to accept the situation and try to make the best out of it. Fighting the Dark Lord would only earn them their deaths.

However, he rarely gave much time and energy to such abstract thoughts. Ernie’s focus was on the here and now, the close and immediate. Even more important than the war and the rise of Voldemort was Ernie’s school experience. He thought they were still treating him very unfairly even if they had all stopped cursing and hexing him.

For the first two weeks he had loitered around the infirmary, thinking that perhaps if he were to wake up the Carrows he would win something for sure and then everyone would be begging to be his friend. That would show everyone to stop talking to him. However, Madam Pomfrey had forbidden him from returning unless he had an obvious and demonstrable illness. Ernie had toyed with the idea of hurting himself so he could get back in there and keep trying, but he didn’t have enough courage and soon he had forgotten about it. The plan was too far reaching in any case. What he wanted was for people to admit that he wasn’t that bad. He was a good person, he really was, and it was very unfair that everyone was acting as if they were better than him.

“It’s not like I had any choice” Ernie would moan to whoever had come close enough to him. “This is all so unfair. They would have done the same. Bunch of hypocrites.”

Maurice, the fifty something year old squib currently sitting in front of him, gave him a black stare. He hadn’t had much to say about his family, good or bad, since he barely had any contact with them until two months ago when his niece knocked on his house in the middle of the night and told him to leave because she had heard in the Ministry that there would be a raid in the morning. That had been nice. He hoped she hadn’t gotten in too much trouble.

He coughed noncommittally and went back to his book. He was tired after a long day cleaning and oiling the carriages and he just wanted a bit of peace. If he had known that the Hufflepuff room would be so crowded he would have stayed by the carriage house. Sometimes he could see the horses there and he liked how they always begged for a treat.

“They were threatening my family!” Ernie muttered. Even a squib should understand that you had to honour your family.

“Oh, dear me, WERE they?”

If cobras had a voice with which to speak, they would sound like Cho Chang did at that moment. She had been sitting on the other side of the Hufflepuff common room where she had joined the
other Quidditch players reviewing the calendar for flight practices and aerial combat. People should be able to fly and cast a spell at the same time, and even more importantly, learn to fly away from a hex just as they did from a bludger. This was turning to be a bit too much to ask of certain people, so they were also training them in plain old flying away very fast.

“I had to—” Ernie started, happy that for once someone was answering back.

“Listen” Cho Chang had risen from her chair. A few hands made a token attempt at drawing her back, but with little effort. Her face was still marred by the black spidery lines and it looked like she would have them forever. She had a right to her anger. “You did what you did and it is time that you take responsibility for it and look for atonement rather than forgiveness. You were threatened? I was threatened too. My family was threatened. I had to cut ties with them publicly so they wouldn’t be in danger. Marietta was threatened and she is in Azkaban, MacMillan. My best friend was arrested and sent to Azkaban. Cedric is in exile. And even there he is helping raise money and spreading awareness in other countries. So you can keep telling to yourself that you had no choice but truth is you did and now you have to live with it.”

There was no good answer to Cho’s word, nothing that could be said. But Ernie of course didn’t let that deter him because he was too used to feeling like a victim.

That kind of obdurate thinking was dangerous, but they could hardly spare any attention to him. There were far more worrying news.

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“But… but I liked her.” Sirius said in a crushed tone, his eyes looking like a piece of cobalt. He had only known her for a couple of hours against the years of Remus’ friendship. Even Severus had met her more times. Yet he looked now as if Severus had delivered a terrible blow.

“Sirius.”

“I liked her a lot.” He said plaintively, as if that would help the universe to realize how wrong it was and bring her back. He went on to detail all the reasons why he liked Teresa so much. Number one being that she had kissed Draco and left a smear on lipstick on his cheek and Merlin knew that Draco needed all the affection he could get. She had also risked being caught by half a dozen Aurors, back when that mattered, and she had hugged Sirius and she had told them about Harry and she had fed Harry lunch and made sure he wouldn’t be caught and there were a few more reasons but by then everybody was too embarrassed to keep listening.

“Black. It doesn’t have to mean anything. The place was empty when Malfoy went there. It was just the body of Avery Sr. and nothing else.”

In fact, Yaxley had accompanied Gaspar Avery and now he was missing too. They really couldn’t say what had happened. People were looking into it, but there were so many things to look into that Severus doubted they would get very far.

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Despite the direness of the situation, Tonks couldn’t keep the thought away. The thought was like a big fat summer fly, going in circles around her head and occasionally landing on a shoulder or near a glass. No matter how much she kept trying to wave it away, the thought never went far.

The thought was: “Why, but this woman resembles Severus Snape.”

There wasn’t much of an actual physical resemblance. Tonks should know. In order to get the best of
her metamorphomagus powers she had learned to pay attention to physical traits so she could later replicate them. This woman had a much darker skin tone, her hair was more reddish brown than black, her facial features were all different and, above all, she was a woman and Snape was not.

The extremely unimpressed gaze with which she was nailing Sturgis Podmore to the floor, however, was very much like Snape’s. If Snape were to take polyjuice, Tonks was sure he would look just like this woman.

It was all very awkward but Tonks couldn’t help watching the scene with delight as people often did when Snape was chewing someone else. She may or may not have taken the form of a Slytherin student and gotten a VIP pass to some of those scoldings.

“S-so, you see” Sturgis went on helplessly, “it’s just b-best this way, because…”

Of course neither Sturgis Podmore not Dedalus Diggle were the most indicated for this job. They were good people, Tonks would never say anything against them in that sense, but they just didn’t have that kind of presence that convinced people to abandon their home and run away with them. Kingsley did and if he had stayed he would probably have better luck explaining things to the woman. But he had left to transport Yaxley to a secure location for interrogation (Andromeda was extremely skilled at making people tell her everything, she didn’t even have to resort to torture despite being a Black).

So it was just Sturgis and Dedalus, who wouldn’t convince a frog to eat flies; Tonks, who was recovering from her ordeal and therefore free to watch with delight and not participate, and Tonks’ father who had actually taken the woman’s side and seemed to be equally enjoying the spectacle.

Well, there was also Moody. Kingsley wasn’t leaving them with just Diggle and Podmore and an injured Tonks in the house. However Moody was out of the negotiations as he was currently locked in a battle of wills of his own.

“… much safer, I am sure you will agree. This safehouse is very safe.”

“Safe, you say?” said the muggle woman. Tonks’ father had to hide a chuckle behind his hand.

“Yes!” Sturgis said with more strength but still a pleading tone. The house was safe and they should stay there. The woman, however, wanted to go.

You would think that she would be more grateful and open to the idea, considering that they had saved her life. After the Mulciber fiasco (although Tonks had gotten some useful information out of it, so “fiasco” was too strong a word in her opinion). Anyway, after that, the deatheater body had decided to look back into Rosier’s and Mulciber’s disappearances and retrace their steps, thinking the Order might have had something to do with it since they have had something to do with their fake return. This took them to a muggle town and the house of a completely innocent woman whose only crime had been marrying a wizard long time ago. She was divorced now, and her ex-husband was doing well as far as Tonks had heard, a Special Operator but not a deatheater (that would be a story to tell). She shouldn’t have been drawn into this. Muggles that abandoned their wizarding families weren’t usually persecuted, or not yet. It was the ones that stayed, like Tonks’ father, who were accused of “continued corruption” and sentenced to death. By their own rules, they should have let her alone.

But they hadn’t. How naïve of them to expect them to conform to their norms.

Only the Order had arrived just in time to save her and confront both Yaxley and Gaspar Avery. The later had been half mad with hate, which made him more dangerous but ultimately easier to fight.
Moody had killed him and then they had reduced and captured Yaxley and right after they had taken the muggle and her daughter to a safe place. Someone else was bound to come when Yaxley and Avery failed to return, and they didn’t dare betting on how long it would be. It would be better, everyone agreed, if the muggles weren’t there when they came to investigate. Emmelina Vance had stayed behind in their place to report and maybe follow whoever came later.

So it had been quite an adventure. They thought that the muggle probably didn’t understand the danger she had been in. When they arrived, she had had both deatheaters in her backyard and apparently she had been very insistently showing them her hydrangeas while failing to notice the deranged smiles in their faces.

(Shemight had been leaning against a big dull shovel, nothing weird about it).

“Safe from who?” she asked now looking at Sturgis as if he were a used and bitten dog toy.

“Ah, um, well. You-Know-Who…”

“What?”

“And his followers.”

“Who, the Beatlemaniacs?”

This time Ted Tonks couldn’t contain his laughter which came to prove the woman was being deliberately obtuse. She had to know about You-Know-Who if she had been married to a wizard.

***

Tonks was very intrigued by the girl, the little muggle girl. Not so little, perhaps, well around Tonks’ usual height. But young. Once you are past twenty five, everyone looks very little to you. Even people in their forties.

The little muggle girl had gone to get a glass of water just as Moody was coming down that same corridor. It was narrow, someone should give way so the other could pass. Usually that someone was whoever had come across Moody because Moody used his unfortunate face without compunction to get whatever he wanted. Tonks had seen him use that creepy eye of his to bully Diggle into surrendering the last sausage at Molly’s breakfasts many times. It took some time knowing him plus massive bravery (Kingsley) or cheerful nonchalance (Tonks) to grow some immunity to him. After all, Moody was a badass, a hard and toughened fighter. It was just natural to feel intimidated in his presence.

The little muggle girl was looking at him as if he were personally responsible for some terrible insult. Moody was being Moody and trying to scare her into a corner. Neither was giving an inch of space. From time to time one of them would growl “move” and the other would snarl back “no.”

They had no idea what had prompted it, they just knew that neither of them were backing up. Perhaps the little muggle girl had felt intimidated and this was how she dealt with her fears. Who knew, who knew? All Tonks knew now was that they were not relenting and they were still engaged in an epic stare-down even after Ted had succeeded in convincing the mother to stay in a different house (with Arthur, Tonks wasn’t sure the muggle had won) until the end of the week.

Fine, Tonks might have an idea because the little girl probably was seventeen or eighteen. Harry Potter’s age in any case. And she lived five minutes away from the cottage where Lupin had hidden him. It was a wild guess (very Black, her father would say) but Tonks thought that out of the Ministry party that went to arrest Lupin and rescue Harry, Hagrid, Dumbledore and Moody would
be the most recognizable. It had seemed very sensible at the time, very necessary, but the mission could have gone smoother and cleaner. Tonks understood that perhaps they hadn’t left a very good impression with the locals. That maybe from their perspective Harry hadn’t been rescued even if he totally was.

***

It was a weekday like any other and it was after lunch. One minute Percy was sitting at his desk reviewing a law proposal for the Minister to sign and the next he was on the floor having convulsions. His legs were jerking, his hands had seized and were cold and twisted like hooks. He stopped breathing for a few seconds.

He had the mother of all visions.

He came back, breathing hard and covered in cold clammy sweat. His jaw ached from how hard he had closed it. He felt as if his stomach had been put inside out. He blinked for a couple of seconds and the magical green lights of the lamps wavered.

He went down again.

This is the problem with prophecies. They are all right as long as you let them be and don’t try to contradict them. But the future is hardly defined and unavoidable, Percy knew this very well. He had made hundreds of prophecies now and then he had worked diligently to make sure they weren’t fulfilled. This in turn opened new possibilities, new events, new prophecies to make.

His brain was now seeing, in the interval of a few seconds, all the things that were going to happen in two days time, plus all the things that could happen if he were to change anything. It was far too much information for one single mind, too many options from which to unravel the one single thread that would bring the best outcome.

After the second attack Percy stayed on the floor, breathing carefully and marvelling at how the hard marble floor could feel warmer than his own skin. There was a small crowd of people gathered around him looking down with worried expressions. Carter was kneeling with a glass of water in his hands and Sullivan was in the background exclaiming that the Junior Assistant to the Ministry had been poisoned.

Percy took the water Carter offered him and Padley’s arm to drag himself to the bathroom. He remembered Harry saying once, probably to Ron, that fainting was not the quick nice process you saw in books and something called “teevee.” Fainting involved having your digestive system reset itself and being nauseous and getting horrible gas, plus a dry mouth and the worst kind of cold sweat.

Harry had fainted a lot during his third year, with the dementors, but he hadn’t complain or whined about it. It had been the year when Percy had to study for his NEWTs and prepare for his brilliant future but still he had noticed that Harry Potter, source of problems as he was, never complained. He felt bad and he fought everybody but he was not one to sit crying uselessly and Percy had felt so, so, sorry for him.

That poor kid. It would be extra work, but Percy would make sure that he got at least one parent alive at the end. He wasn’t sure how because he had seen them die and die and die again, (such deaths, too, no wonder his stomach was so upset) but he would get him at least one. He would like to get both, of course. In fact, Percy would like to save everyone but right now, standing in front of the sink in the Ministry bathroom waiting for his stomach to decide if it was going to belch or to throw up, Percy didn’t fool himself. They might not win. They might have to call it a win simply because Voldemort was dead, even if it required a hundredth lives sacrifice. “Win” for Percy was an empty
word. He had seen many of those “wins” and he hadn’t liked them at all. He had even seen and outcome in which Voldemort died but his cause lived on anyway.

Percy’s face and hands and back were cold and clammy, covered with a sticky kind of cold sweat that was the worst thing Percy had ever experienced. He had never liked sweating. He liked yoga because it was a slow exercise with no sweat. The sweat he got in the rare occasions he played Quidditch with his brothers, or roughhoused with his roommates in Gryffindor tower or helped dear Oliver practice his feints, that sweat was a thousand times better than the cold dead thing that was now over his body.

Percy sat down on the floor, resting his temple against the side of the sink. The cold porcelain helped abate the pulsing in his head, a pressure so hard that he could hardly see.

He now knew that it would be then when the twins… but not just them, not just one of them, others too, so many others. Lupin and Black who had been watching over the twins, and Snape who took the refugees Percy sent his way, and Hagrid, and Tonks who was in the same year as Charlie and would occasionally become redhead so she could mix with the Weasley clan, and a girl called Millicent Bulstrode that Percy barely remembered, and that tiny Gryffindor who used to follow Harry Potter around, and that other Gryffindor girl with the smile and the headband, and many other people Percy didn’t know.

In some versions, the worse versions, Percy did something to save them and he did it only for them to die a few minutes later and then someone else would die too. Minerva McGonagall, even if she looked like a force of nature, and professor Flitwick, and Ginny, dear Merlin, Percy had to lie down again at the thought of losing Ginny too. She was not supposed to die. Not unless Percy tried to save that other girl and then Ginny would be in the absolutely wrong place, ready to be killed by Rabastan Lestrange. She would die because Percy tried to save some other girl, someone else’s sister.

Percy had a very upset stomach and a tingling sensation down his arms so he was allowed to feel very sorry and small for the next fifteen minutes. He was not allowed to cry because he was in the toilets of the Ministry, but he could feel sorry. Then he was going to splash some water over his face and rinse his mouth and he was going to grab on to that fool Sullivan’s cry of having been poisoned and launch an investigation that would hopefully keep a few people distracted. He was going to take his pale face and the deep shadows under his eyes and he was going to use them to once again be dismissed from work for the next few days.

In fact, although he didn’t know this yet, Percy looked so bad that the Minister himself was going to offer him use of his fireplace so he could get home. Percy would politely decline because his stomach was far too jostled already. He would go to St. Mungo, though, at the Minister’s insistence. He would go and stay there because he needed to keep the appearance that he did not know what had come over him. He would sit there while they prodded and tested and as he lay down on the bed he was going to take a deep breath and he was going to think. Start sorting his thoughts in an orderly manner.

He had time. Not much time, but there was some and like hell was Percy getting anything less that the best possible outcome. Never mind his previous melancholic and defeatist mind-frame and ten thousand possible different futures be damned, he was getting the good one.

He had the inkling that it would be the one with an aftertaste of mint and chocolate and coffee.

***

Hogwarts had many wards and protections. It had been built with the idea that muggles posed a
threat to the wizarding children in there. Or that’s what was said and repeated. If one were to be more historically accurate then we would say that muggles, pureblood wizards, goblins, giants, hags, vampires, and that Italian woman who thought she was a princess, had all at some point attempted to do some damage to Hogwarts.

They had built more protections over time and, given their history, those protections focused on keeping people out more than they did in keeping people in. This doesn’t mean that leaving Hogwarts was easy because it was not. This is to explain how difficult it was to get inside Hogwarts now.

Even if you could shake off the spell that sent muggles away (originally casted by the founders circa 10th century), there was also a standard charm pushing people off the border (17th century, right during the talks about the statue of secrecy). Plus another one that made it so that the three steps to cross the line took the same time and effort as traversing a whole moor. (Date and caster unknown, rumoured to be Merlin despite it being historically impossible). This was without counting the spell laid by the Carrows, (Alecto, mostly, she was really good), that simply barred any humans from leaving or entering the grounds. And since it had been casted by them it was particularly vicious in its application.

However, Romasanta was a monster. This wasn’t bragging on his part or exaggeration from the people he had fought, tortured and killed. No, he actually had a special card that said so. “Creature of near human intelligence” it read, and in the line below “mixed breed”, and it would be great to say that he had received it with the new regime but he had actually possessed long before that, when Fudge was still Minister.

Romasanta had a werewolf’s physical strength and endurance, plus the trolls’ resistance to magic and a bit of giant to enhance everything. He was also, as already stated, an idiot and in this case it was an advantage. While a reasonable person would know that there was no point in trying to force his way through the spells and that they should look for a better alternative, Romasanta was like a drill or a hammer, convinced that with enough strength he could do it.

The spell against muggles had little to do against him. The 17th century charm pushing people away worked, but Romasanta was too big and strong to let some magical force push him away. It just felt like a strong gust of wind. If crossing the line took hours and a lot of energy, if you were to feel despair as you walked and walked and didn’t seem to get any closer, that was for the high people who gave orders and had thoughts. Romasanta didn’t question it. He just tilted his head down and pushed forward. He had an objective and that was enough.

The spell of the Carrows had more effect. He felt it fall over his skin, sink down on his muscles and sinews and pull this way and the other. But there was little of human in Romasanta and if that human part of him felt a pain that was like a torment, if there was a wave of agony surging up with every step he took, it wasn’t anything extraordinary. He was used to pain, and all the other non-human parts of his being were strong enough to help him keep moving forward.

It was hard and painful and he sweated and bleed for it, but in the end he got to the other side of the border all the same. He got inside and after all those protection spells there was just a forest in which Romasanta was but another creature.

One of the strongest, too.

***

Percy arrived home late, after having spent some interminable hours in St. Mungo. Not surprisingly
they hadn’t been able to give a diagnose and they had just recommended some rest which was what people always told Percy whenever he complained of any ailments. “Don’t study so much. Get yourself outside, rest.”

Whatever, he did not have time to rest. He wasn’t sure he had time to plan. The time in St. Mungo had been less fruitful than expected. He hadn’t done much thinking, but he had at least sorted his thoughts and visions into some semblance of order. This meant that now he knew where to start to look, even if it meant that he had to 1) look 2) understand the workings and consequences of what he was seeing 3) plan accordingly 4) enact said plan.

He came home carrying a bag of crisps. He put it in the kitchen counter and he began to do the dishes slowly, by hand. Why he did them by hand when he was a wizard, he didn’t know. He didn’t even like doing the dishes. He just felt like he had to. It was good to do some things without using his wand.

(This was a thought for later. Look further into it).

When he was done he undressed slowly and put his clothes, all of them, in a corner, a different one from the laundry corner. He didn’t want to wear those clothes ever again. He thought they reeked of vomit (true) and death (not true).

He went to the shower. Percy stayed there exactly fifteen minutes. He had put an alarm clock by the bottle of gel to avoid dwindling too much under the warm spray. This was exactly the kind of thing Percy did. Allot himself some time and observe it and be precise and effective in every action, even during leisure time.

He got out, dried himself, got dressed, forgot to put on product on his hair. He opened the bag of crisps and got an emergency coke from his fridge. Coke was, hands down, the absolute best remedy for an upset stomach. Percy knew because he had had some very difficult four years and he had tried everything. Calming potions gave him nausea now.

He ate the crisps, unflavoured, only salt in them, and drank the coke and he tried to do as the yoga teacher said and make his brain go to white. Of course, usually you did this while seated in lotus pose, or savasana, not while sitting cross-legged next to your couch (Percy just liked sitting on the floor better, rather than on the couch; most of the time he used the coach as a backrest). You certainly didn’t bring snacks for meditation.

Never mind that, his way worked better. Percy ate the crisps slowly and relished each and every one of them. At the moment there was a very high chance that it would be the last time he got a treat. Even if Percy survived, and he had better chances than most, how was he supposed to eat and laugh ever again? How was he supposed to go on? If he survived but the others didn’t he just wouldn’t be able to enjoy a treat.

He was down to thirteen hours before it happened and no matter how he looked at it, there was no way to stop it. Thirteen hours and then a full day after that before he heard and began to act. And of course his visions were very detailed about what would happen then but they were blurry and confusing about the closer events that would trigger everything. He knew about the disaster but he didn’t know how to stop it, how to avoid it happening. If he focused and was very, very, lucky he might know how to divert it and turn in around. Perhaps, maybe.

But the thing, the thing with those idiots? He couldn’t stop that, he simply saw no way. It was like seeing someone mess up a potion. You couldn’t stop them from blowing their cauldron under their face, but you could maybe avoid the boiling brew falling over your head.
That night Harry had a nightmare. It was a very interesting nightmare. He was in a long and narrow kitchen. So narrow that he could hardly turn around, but miles and miles long. Draco had come and demanded he made him some banana ice-cream and while Harry had found the milk, he could not find the bananas and he ran and ran around the kitchen while Draco huffed and puffed in the background and said he was going to report Harry to Victor Krum.

“I don’t even like bananas that much” Draco said when Harry woke him to tell him.

“Neither does Victor if I remember correctly” mumbled Hermione from her position by the window. She went on to inform them that Krum had seemed fond of desserts with berries and nuts with them.

Harry was still a bit tense and upset for having had to run around failing to find an important thing and disappointing Draco in the process. He was also oddly content because he felt that weird as it was, it was a normal person nightmare. Absolutely no genocide or grotesque transmutations in it.

The funny thing was that they were not sleeping that well. Far worse than in Grimmauld Place where despite the coldness and hardness and general unwelcome feeling (plus all the creatures there) Draco and Harry had slept soundly from the very first night. Now they were in Diagon Alley which was arguably a bit less cold and hard, and sleeping there was awful. There was too much noise and movement and the walls were too thin. They had resorted to sleeping in turns and having someone always on watch because that was the only way the two others could relax enough to fall asleep.

Given all the inconveniences, it might had made more sense if they returned to Chillington or any other village of their choosing. They could stay in a house in there, instead of in an abandoned shop, and they wouldn’t have to move to a new place everyday. As it was, most of the abandoned houses in Diagon Alley were being re-appropriated fairly quickly so they had to use empty business and there was too many people around for them to feel comfortable staying two nights in the same place.

They didn’t like Diagon Alley but it had its advantages.

If they weren’t there they would never had learned that the black and green flag that Gringotts and some other business occasionally flew was meant to signal the presence of Voldemort in the city. A symbol of the people’s welcome. They had also discovered that there was a submarket that dealt with death eater tracking. Knowing where to go so you could meet someone and maybe ask them for a favour.

There was lots of information in there, enough that it made it worthy to stay. They wouldn’t have to wait for long, in any case. There would be more movement during the festivities (solstice, yule, then Christmas and the New Year) so even with vigilance they could travel North without drawing attention.

It made sense to go to Hogwarts next, even if they were also thinking on how to get close to the snake. It seemed that Voldemort kept it by his feet so it was no big leap of thought. Horcruxes that weren’t tangled on the Dark Lord’s skirts were to be destroyed first. So, Hogwarts, which would be a long trip even if they went by broom. Draco thought that with money and patience they could retrace the steps he had taken when he left with Sirius and Remus, but since that required getting very close to some very dangerous individuals they were taking it slowly and preparing a backup plan for the inevitable betrayal they would find. Besides none of them were in a rush to get to the school. Subconsciously it felt as if once they returned they wouldn’t be allowed to leave again and even Hermione had some trouble with that.

“What I could have is a cheesy omelette for breakfast” said Draco, knowing too well that they would
be lucky if Harry managed to conjure some fresh fruit to go yesterday’s leftovers.

***

It took Romasanta all night to get across the Forbidden Forest. He wasn’t tired or hungry, though. He could go for long periods without sleep and he was far from a picky eater so anything would do. He had been delayed a little bit while he fought a big ugly spider, which didn’t provide him with much meat for the nasty way it fought but he snacked on its carcass anyway. There had also been some nasty river creatures that tried pulling him into the water and drown him, but after he broke the second neck they all scurried back to their burrows. He didn’t get to eat any of them.

He didn’t come across many other monsters or animals. Truly, if it took him so long to get across it was because he got lost easily and kept going in circles. He didn’t do well alone. He didn’t do too badly because he was very strong and that helped him survive, but he barely knew what he was doing most of the time. He should had crossed the forest in one third of the time.

He arrived to the open grounds around the castle just when the sun was rising and despite his dimmed wits he had enough sense to keep out of sight. Waiting didn’t come naturally to Romasanta and he did not have a build that was easy to hide, but Thorton had beaten into him the necessity of remaining unseen at least until he had a clear objective. There had been a couple of instances in which Romasanta didn’t wait or didn’t hide well enough and their targets ran away before they could be snatched.

Romasanta knew his objective. He had to find something of Snape’s that he could bring back to the Lestrange woman so he could get a reward and hopefully a new master. Of course he needed something a bit more concrete before he could act, but it didn’t occur to him that he would have much trouble. Although he was as dense and thick as tar he believed himself to be quite an expert. He had gone on many missions with his master and he had seen him find evidence of transgressions many times. He was sure he could do the same. As soon as he saw it he would recognize it and snatch it, no problem whatsoever.

It took him, however, quite a few hours before it began to dawn on him that the dozen of adults working around the greenhouses couldn’t be students or faculty and therefore shouldn’t be there. Especially the ones with muggle clothes. It took him longer still to see that the handsome man giving an encouraging and heartening chat to the small group of students gathered by the winter flowers who were having trouble with some weird silvery spell might be the infamous Sirius Black. To be fair, the scene didn’t look particularly debauched, sinful and immoral, so Romasanta wasn’t sure how he was supposed to recognize him if he didn’t act as described. If that Weasley rat hadn’t called him by name he would never have figured it out.

The Weasley, on the other hand, was adequately fitting to the description. Redheaded and wearing a mocking image of the Dark Lord. That Romasanta could recognize and he knew it was wrong. Why, just a few weeks ago, when he still had a master, he had broken a wizard’s arm just because he used to be friends with the Weasley clan. Then Master Thorton had stepped in and found many other reasons to punish the wizard, as he always did. That’s why he was the master.

Unfortunately, the Weasley-friend wizard had escaped before Romasanta could tear his fingers off. They had given chase but then there had been the ambush in which the master was injured. But the point was that that wizard had been a very bad wizard and he wasn’t even a famous one. Here they had one Weasley and one Sirius Black who were known to be badder people, or worse, whatever word was right. And this was all happening under Snape’s big aquiline nose. The shame.

(Not that Romasanta knew such a word. If he had to describe Snape’s nose he would say it looked like a hatchet because that was something he had seen and used frequently).
Obviously, Snape was failing terribly at his work as Headmaster of Hogwarts if both Black and Weasley had managed to sneak in and deceive him. Bellatrix would like very much to be able to call him on it. How embarrassed he was going to be! Everybody would laugh at his failure and he would be sent down to perform some of the most annoying missions while they put someone much better in his place. Maybe he would be demoted so much (yet another word that Romasanta didn’t really know) that he would be below Romasanta. Maybe now he wouldn’t have to be the one to stand outside in the cold and rain waiting to snatch someone. Snape would be the one doing that and Romasanta would only be called when there was actual people to chase and bite and wouldn’t that be nice? Have that dirty nasty Snape do the ugly work and call Romasanta just for the fun.

Evidently, Romasanta did not comprehend the situation. It didn’t occur to him that it was impossible for Snape to not know what was happening and that what he was seeing was proof of a betrayal and not of a failure. He had no idea of what he had discovered, but that is rarely an obstacle for an idiot ruining something.

***

Philip didn’t like Ernie very much, but he was still nice to him, or civil at the very least. He did not approve of what he had done, but he understood a little bit how scared the child must had been and how at the time he must have convinced himself that it truly was the only option. Mostly, Philip had known quite a lot of exclusion and rejection in his life, even before he became a werewolf, so he couldn’t help feeling some sympathy even when Ernie had brought it all over himself.

“Maybe if you show them that you are sorry” he would say. “Think of something that can make it up.”

“They all hate me!”

“They don’t hate you. They hate what you did.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Perhaps if you showed…”

“Why are you even doing this? I don’t need a dirty werewolf to give me life lessons.”

Ernie did not know a good chance when it presented itself.

There were not many people who were willing to show him patience and kindness like Philip did. The most he got was some careful neutrality from teachers, because it wasn’t right for them to exclude him. The rest had their own stories, their own trials and moral dilemmas, their own worries, to spend much time with an ungrateful snob. They weren’t even actively hurting him anymore, but they certainly didn’t like his company and it was made clear that he was tolerated but not welcome.

If only he picked up his wand and went to help in any of the projects (from protective clothes to medical supplies) in time he might earn back his place between them. He might earn forgiveness. But he didn’t, because it was just easier to keep complaining.

There had been a sudden increase in corporeal patronus lately. Seamus had gotten one before he was done completing the movement and it hung around the room for almost fifteen minutes. Dean had casted one too, a bit weaker but very bright none the less as it jumped and frolicked around Seamus’ silver fox. Before that, results had been more mixed no matter how many extra lessons professor Lupin offered. Luna consistently got one, to general bewilderment, but it wasn’t very potent. Neville had casted a corporeal one on a few occasions but some days he could only manage a small stream.
of silver light. It was the same for many of them. No matter how hard they tried to focus, they simply
didn’t have enough spirit, their hearts split between the present and all those that were absent and
lost.

Ron was good, had always been good. When asked, because the quality and endurance of his
*patronus* was amazing, he said he just had to think of that pigeon message that told him that his
friend was alive and that was enough.

(It was, funnily enough, the same technique used by Gregory Goyle. Severus had been really
surprised when he heard about it and he had stared at Remus for a long time in awe of his teaching
prowess).

Ron said that sometimes he mixed the memory with the one about the twins returning to Hogwarts
after their disappearance during the summer. He feared that the memory would lose some potency
otherwise and he wanted to keep the emotion fresh.

As a tip for casting a *patronus* it was good. Better not to overuse one single memory. That was good.
But the damage had been done as everybody had unconsciously glanced in Ernie’s way. Ron’s most
powerful and joyous memory was hearing that Harry and Hermione were alive. It was hard not to
remember about Ernie’s part in it.

They had all looked at him, with empty eyes or with accusing stares and some even with pity and
Ernie did not deserve pity! Do not dare pity him. He had done nothing wrong. He had protected his
family. He should not be pitied for that. He should be admired.

They had a small break after class and Ernie went outside, away from everybody and their stupid
stares. It was cold and he could feel his nose and ears going red, but it was just easier staying in there
rather than going back inside and enduring everyone’s presence. It’s not like they would tell him off
for missing class. They were very strict this year, classes were super hard and there were many extra
lesson in the evenings so that they hardly had any time to themselves. But Ernie knew nobody would
care if he skipped them. The lessons were not for him, they were for the people who wanted to fight
against the “dark arts”, as if that would get them anywhere. As if having a freaking halfblood
werewolf teaching them weren’t a bigger problem.

The other werewolf, Philip, came to him now. He was often outside, taking care of inventory,
checking how many plants and ingredients they had at a time. People liked him. He didn’t mix much
with students, but people liked him.

“Here” he said now as he handed Ernie a scarf. He stopped just for a couple of seconds looking at
Ernie with a calm and serene gaze before walking away. He had learned not to expect any thanks
from Ernie.

Philip left to check on the mandrakes on greenhouse seven and then the bushes on the treeline
behind. The bushes weren’t very interesting by themselves other than because they housed a colony
of flying buzzsnaps and their droppings had some use or another. Ernie didn’t care.

He put on the scarf because it was cold, but he sulked about it. The next lesson of the day had started
by now and the grounds were almost empty. It was just Ernie feeling angry and sorry for himself and
fantasizing about something horrible occurring and him fixing it or coming on top in any case and
how everyone would come crawling to him begging for forgiveness. It was a nice daydream that he
imagined often and he got much comfort from it. He was just imagining how he would turn Cho
Chang away when she begged for his help when Ernie heard a scuffle and a scream cut short.

You didn’t hear much screaming in Hogwarts nowadays, not unless the twins were playing with the
first and second years.

He went to investigate what it was.

He saw.

He made his mind very, very, quickly. You know what he chose.

***

“What, may I ask, are you two doing?” Said Draco, cheeks sill flushed from the cold outside, as he returned with the bags containing their lunch and dinner.

Harry and Hermione looked up from the display of books they had on the table. They had twin carefully curated blank and guileless expressions. Very good, but not so good as to fool a Slytherin.

“Because it doesn’t look to me like you are collecting wand samples or making an amulet for the trip up north.” Draco continued. To be fair Harry still had an old potion set open next to him. He was supposed to find and sort anything that Draco could use for a wand, while Hermione wanted to see if she could make something to repel dementors. Harry’s patronus might be well known by now and they were expecting to come across some of them if the rumours from the bakery could be trusted.

The open books over the table were not necessary for either task.

“He wanted to know if vampires can get sick” said Hermione, the traitor, pointing at Harry, “and I didn’t know the answer.”

Harry raised his brows slightly and widened his eyes in attempt to express that it was a valid question.

“You won’t find the answer in Beauford and Mitchell” Draco noted, sitting down. “Maybe some German author. They do have a higher number of vampires over there.”

“You have read Beauford and Mitchell?” The book was dreadfully dense and thick and it was divided in three volumes. Hermione had looked at it once, when she figured out that Slytherin’s monster was a basilisk, and never again. If it had any academic value, it was in that it pushed people to look for other sources.

“Barely. But it got popular in Slytherin during the fourth year. The general agreements is that it is more exhaustive than useful.”

It was, so they closed the book and went back to work while Draco put the food away and checked on the wards around the shop’s entrance (a bookstore this time, but more focused on selling quills and parchment that any decent selection of books). In the background Harry explained his theory that all beings that feed were susceptible to disease and therefore vampires should have some sort of common cold. Later they would have lunch and in the evening they would make a bed and the next morning they would move to a new hiding place and so on until they felt ready to go.

Because they thought that they could go when they felt ready and not when the situation pushed them.

***

Lachan Romasanta had found something and he had also been found. Being found could be a problem except for how he had acted quickly and grabbed the man (not really a man, though, but a
werewolf) before he could give the alarm. He would have broken his neck right away and hidden the corpse in the bushes except that the master had told him not. That’s right, Romasanta had gone and found a master all by himself!

It was not a very good master. He looked too young and he used very long words but he had just the right tone. He told Romasanta not to kill the werewolf (who was even now struggling) and that they should go right away to inform the other deatheaters. What they had to tell them he didn’t really understand. The New Master spoke of Snape being a traitor and while Romasanta could understand the idea of failing an order and not doing a good job (the old master always let him know when that was the case) he just couldn’t wrap his mind around the idea of deliberately not following an order. Why would anyone do that?

Still, he felt like he now had two pieces to present to the Lestrange woman and she could choose which one she liked best. Romasanta was now thinking that it really wasn’t up to him to explain Snape’s failures. It was enough to bring someone who could do it for him. The werewolf had been carrying a piece of parchment so he must be educated. Bellatrix could ask him if she didn’t understand Romasanta’s New Master.

He hoped he didn’t keep this master for long. He seemed too anxious. But he did know how to orient himself, that was a clear advantage right there. Going back through the forest with an adult werewolf over his shoulder (punched into submission so he would stop struggling) should have been harder, if not for the added weight (Romasanta was big and strong) because he needed both hands free to think in which direction to go. But the New Master could look at the sun and tell which way to go so they reached the end of the forest in little time.

There was a slight problem, though.

Here is the thing, Romasanta hadn’t stopped to give much thought to why and how he had managed to get through the wards around the castle. He simply walked through and didn’t question the mechanics. Because he didn’t, neither did Ernie. Stupidity is contagious.

The spell laid by Alecto Carrow should keep all humans away. It had been casted to keep people out as much as keeping them in. But Romasanta had little human blood and he was so used to pain in any case that he was able to push forward just as he had done coming in. Philip, who had woken an hour ago, had hoped that the spell would push him back, that maybe he could escape simply because he couldn’t be dragged any more. But the monster was grabbing him tight and his lycanthropy was enough to let him squeeze through the tendrils of the spell even if he passed out with pain.

Ernie was just a plain human. Pureblooded, he might say, but it turned out in this situation it did not make any difference. He stepped forward right after Romasanta and his heart was beating so fast that it was enough to drown Philip’s pleas to reconsider and not do this, he still had time to go back.

As if. He was not going back. Philip was wrong. He knew what he was doing. It was not a mistake and he wouldn’t regret it.

(Philip wasn’t wrong).

Usually the wards around the castle would have pushed him back, as they used to do with Harry, preventing him from stepping forward. But now there was also Alecto’s spell over them and they interacted weirdly. Ernie was able to step right into the charm barrier. It felt like a very thin layer falling over his skin, curling over itself as it enveloped his flesh and then lifting slightly. It felt as if being surrounded by the most delicate kind of shroud only for it to transform into barbed wire.

Romasanta was sweating with effort and bleeding slightly. If only Ernie had stopped to take a good
look at him, if only he had considered even for a second that perhaps that big man’s natural state wasn’t so dirty, that he must have gone through something before meeting him in the grounds, then he might have thought better about this. He might have survived.

But Ernie hadn’t thought about anything other than getting away from Hogwarts and finally earning a sweet, sweet, reward from Voldemort. Even now, while he felt as his flesh was torn away from his bones, as he felt the sting of salt and blood over open cuts, all he could think was that Romasanta was crossing, was getting away, and he wasn’t so he had to keep trying. He kept trying over the pain that went to his nerves and sinews and rattled his bones, he kept trying even when he felt his blood heating up and beginning to boil, he kept trying and he barely got a few centimetres forward and the spells tightened over him pushing him back and down and there was a burnt smell now and it was coming from him.

He fell down on his knees, and then on his face, with a hand extended after Romasanta. He didn’t have any eyes with which to see as Romasanta crossed with an unconscious Philip and got away.

He stayed behind, right in the border.

And he died there.

Chapter End Notes

Fainting does cause an upset stomach. You will never see this in books or movies, but it is common to get gas. A coke works really well.
Ernie had been wrong.

Of course, this was nothing new.

Philip’s absence was noticed soon enough and when he didn’t show up for lunch people asked after him. But even though Ernie had been convinced that no one would notice or care if he weren’t there, the truth is that he remained a student and so by his second missed class professor Babbling sent word to professor Sprout to look after him. Everybody liked Philip better, but Ernie’s absence was noticed first.

When they realized that both were missing, people began to feel concerned. Not worried, not yet, because Hogwarts was safe. Nothing bad should be able to come from the outside so at most they feared some freak accident caused by the multiple dangerous things they had on the inside. That would be bad, but not terribly bad.

Ghosts were dispatched to search for them and people and portraits were interrogated. Sirius offered to turn into his dog form and sniff some clothes (Philip’s, he was not getting anyway near that traitorous duplicitous rat). There was no evidence that Sirius’ sense of smell were good enough to follow a trace but it was a bit better than that of a human, that was for sure. Remus too was made to sniff around even though he swore that he was not any good at following traces, merely at getting an idea of where someone had been.

(Both Sirius and Severus had their doubts. Remus had an unerring ability to wander in whenever someone had just opened a package of cookies. If that wasn’t catching and following a scent, they didn’t know what it was).

The ghosts started to return without a hint of where Philip and Ernie were. The faun whose painting hung near the main stairs was finally located in the room behind the Great Hall (drinking the wine from a still life) and he said that he thought he had seen them go outside, although it might had been the day before.

There was quite a lot of outside to look around. Even though it was cold now, there was always someone outside flying, trying new spells, checking the greenhouses or the carriage house. In fact, Philip was usually one of those that stayed outside. He didn’t mind the cold and someone had to take note of the storage. Hagrid invited him inside for a cup of tea almost daily.

But not today. Hagrid had been busy caring for the salamanders and he hadn’t seen him. When told about it, he brought Fang to sniff at the clothes and the hound instantly pointed at the Forbidden Forest.

This was… worrying. They had been working about securing that area (“Giant spiders, Hagrid. You
have secret giant spiders there”) and even though the talks with the centaurs were going well, (all thanks to Luna who was so weird and confusing to them that they were always willing to listen just to get a closer look), there remained many creatures that could pose a threat.

It was also a bit windy, so the parchment with carefully annotated numbers that Philip had dropped was already far away, by the Quidditch field. They didn’t see it as they went by the spot where Romasanta had been hiding, following the trace Fang had picked. The dog went first, with Hagrid not far behind, then a transformed Sirius who kept running between all of them and who turned back into human quickly to tell them that, over what he thought might be Philip’s scent, there was an acrid stench of metal and rotten soil. Remus, who was in the rear with Severus, said that he smelled it too, something like wet metal and fungus.

Minerva stayed behind, not without negotiation over who got to go and who had to stay and make sure the castle didn’t panic or spontaneously collapse. Ron was happy to stay because he had already seen more than he would like of the forest (“When was this exactly, Weasley?” “So long ago that there is no point in thinking a punishment, professor McGonagall”).

It didn’t take long. They were going with Hogwarts’ groundskeeper and they all knew how to look at the sun and the stars that were starting to come (nights came so early in December) so in just a bit over two hours they found themselves by the south border of the forest. There were less trees there, but that only meant that the brambles could grow almost just as high.

It was quiet there, eerily so. Hagrid said that most creatures and animals stayed well away from the border. The border was dangerous, it meant leaving a good cover, so if they were going to risk coming near the treeline, they would do it on the side closest to the castle since in that case there was always the possibility of stealing a sandwich from a student.

(Had happened to James Potter at least twice).

They didn’t see anything. Nothing to indicate why Fang had brought them there. Severus put his hand in the air, feeling for the invisible charms that hung around the line. They were all there, buzzing in the air and feeling a bit like the force of a magnet. If the spells were there, then Philip and Ernie ought to be there or somewhere between this point and the castle, making their way back.

In the background they could hear Fang panting excitedly. He barked, short, loud.

“There is something here” called Hagrid as he kneeled on the floor. The lantern he had been carrying had lost its flame a while ago and for some reason *lumos* was never enough in the forest. It lighted the face and hands of the caster and little else. It was better not to cast it at all and keep one’s night vision. At the moment, however, they could only see the dark mass of Hagrid a few steps before them, looking like one of those overgrown brambles that covered the place. They heard as Hagrid fumbled with the flint and finally got the light back.

“Oh… Oh, god.”

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It was so cold. It was also very dark, but Remus was more bothered by the cold. No one likes fighting in the cold, running around freezing your feet and hands and later feeling the sweat you had built slowly chill over your skin. He remembered that the last war had also felt very cold. The following years too, until Severus knocked on his door with a toddler in his arms and Remus moved to a new home. It had been warm in there.

“This is good” said Luna with that dreamy voice and hard-boiled optimism. It looked very silly but
Remus had discovered, through Severus, that her optimism wasn’t born from ignorance or denial but from a core of determination. She had been happy before her mother’s death and then she had been very sad. Luna, with that crushing logic of some Ravenclaws, had decided that she did not like being sad and she preferred to be happy so that’s what she was.

Sometimes, it was easy to see why she had befriended Harry. They both had a taste for happiness.

“Is it?” asked Sirius, looking at the sad little figure in the ground and then at the sky as if he were expecting to see broomsticks in there already or storm clouds at the very least. There wasn’t a very good view of the sky in Azkaban, but it was the only view they got and Sirius liked looking up in moments of distress. The forest wasn’t as dense here so it was easier to get a look at the sky, dark blue going black.

“Lovegood, I told you not to come.” Severus said over his shoulder, his attention focused on the seemingly intact wards.

“But only once.”

She had a very good point.

Luna’s hair seemed to be moving by itself and she was also patting the air. Remus was very surprised to find that he could not see the thestrals that must had been populating the place. Later, in a quiet moment stolen from the approaching darkness, as they lay in bed, Severus would tell him that of course he couldn’t see the thestrals. Remus was less a killer than a saviour and protector, and he was obviously a good protector if he hadn’t seen anyone die.

That was a nice velvety thought. Sixteen years ago he would have thought that it was yet another mark of failure. A sign that he hadn’t been involved enough and he hadn’t fought hard enough, so he wasn’t acquainted with death. The mark of a coward. It took a Slytherin to show that it could also be proof of success.

“Why is this good?” Sirius asked in a loud whisper. He was very confused by Luna, but he liked how she followed Severus around. People didn’t usually notice but Sirius liked almost everyone. It was one of his virtues, how he could find something to like in everyone.

“We have a new moon tonight” she said. “If I were to attack Hogwarts I would want to come during the full moon, when professor Lupin is unavailable and I would have better light to traverse the forest.”

Luna had a surprisingly good mind for this kind of thing. Not strategy, exactly, but fighting and winning wars. Sometimes she stood there and it felt like she could see some truth that was so big and sharp and undesired that common eyes went over it without noticing it. Like how she used to look at Dumbledore as if he were a funny performer and how she looked at professor Moody (actually Barty Crouch Jr.) and, inexplicably, said he was just like Gilderoy Lockhart.

“The darkness won’t be a problem for us” she went on “because we know the grounds and the castle better. Really, this came at a very good time.”

She was just a few steps away from Ernie’s body. She was petting two thestrals now, calm and gentle, and that alone said that she had every right to be there with them. (It might be why Severus had only told her to stay away once. By now, it was like him whishing her a good morning).

“I hope you are right” whispered Sirius, still looking at the sky. Even through the canopy of thorns and branches that looked like spikes, the sight of the sky was preferable to that of the blackened
corpse in the ground. Even now they weren’t completely sure that it was Ernie McMillan. They knew it probably wasn’t Philip because he was bigger and had wavy hair, whereas the little hair they could see here was straight and probably blonde, hard to tell with all the blood and soot. Even with Hagrid’s lamp and all their wands casting *lumos* combined, the body was so deformed that it was impossible to tell for sure who it was. A quick count of hands and feet had been necessary to ascertain that it was a human and not a tragic centaur miscarriage.

They were all a bit surprised by how well they were keeping their stomachs.

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Returning to the castle with the body was a hard and gross task. To their horror, they discovered that simply levitating the body wasn’t enough as a significant amount of chunks remained in the grass and had to be levitated by someone else. Sirius gave them a lengthy explanation on the way back about the special interaction of charms with fluids. It was very interesting except for the particular fluids he was levitating at the moment, but he didn’t drop any of them.

There was more. Someone was still missing and there was the very real possibility that their defences had been breached and an attack were imminent; but they couldn’t think too much about it, not yet, because at the same time they had the body of a student and they had to do something about it, something respectful. Death, however, doesn’t allow for much respect. Death transforms a person into a heavy unyielding load with awful odours. Death requires, no, it *demands* a quick disposal that is complicated by emotions and the necessity of a ritual.

They didn’t want to bury Ernie in Hogwarts. It seemed like a very high honour for such an undeserving boy. It also felt wrong to voice their objections. One shouldn’t speak ill of the dead and all that. More practically, they should be done with it as soon as possible and prepare for whatever came next. Just when they were coming out of the forest Hagrid coughed, blew his nose, and said with a heavy voice that he would deal with it which was enough for everyone to agree. It wouldn’t be a significantly special place, not like the one where Dumbledore rested. Just a neutral spot to bury the body, respectful but with no distinction or privilege, right on the edge of one of the thestrals’ favourite grazing grounds.

Severus nodded at Hagrid and said nothing. He had been quiet all the way back from the far edge of the forest. Maybe that was why Sirius had been speaking so much. Remus remembered he used to be extra talkative after the full moons to cover up if Remus was particularly quiet.

“What time is it?” Severus asked.

“Past seven” answered Luna.

He nodded. “Grab a bite and go to bed and when people pester you with questions you tell them that I said that everyone needed to rest.”

That was an order. They needed their rest.
The day before

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Some death and torture, but not very explicit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A few hours before the sunrise Romasanta arrived in Malfoy Manor with his precious cargo. He didn’t have a wand with which to apparate and he didn’t want to risk a fireplace in case they took the werewolf from him as he went through the Ministry Atrium. He had to walk, take a bus, walk some more and finally get to a portkey that left him just five miles away from the manor. In that time the werewolf had tried to escape twice and Romasanta had had to beat him into submission just as many times. He hadn’t tried a third, probably because he was barely awake.

Not many people were up at that time, but beyond the house-elves there was also a couple of wizards awake. Voldemort didn’t like how the house had been unguarded in the past. There was now a permanent retinue on watch and they were the ones who opened the doors for Romasanta. The world was only now starting to be less dark, no pink or grey yet in the sky.

Hermione was awake too, despite the time. She had less trouble than Harry and Draco with mornings so she always took the last watch of the night. Nowadays they got up before sunrise so by the time the first rays hit the roofs of the houses in Diagon Alley they would be in the street moving to a new secure location. There is something about the sunrise that makes any suspicious activity suddenly look efficient and trustworthy. During the sunrise it doesn’t look like you are trying to avoid being watched, but you are naturally unseen.

Hermione waited by the window with her needle-wand in her hand, taking slow and even breaths that were perfectly measured to keep her calm but alert. The street was only now becoming deep blue. When the big letters in the storefronts became visible, she would wake the boys and they would go down the block to a lawyer’s office that had been emptied two weeks ago. Apparently it had been found that the lawyer there was helping move money to the continent for the refugees. It had been thoroughly inspected so it was safe to expect that it wouldn’t get another visit soon.

Percy was also up, he had been up all night and the night before although he thought he might had gotten a nap at some point during the previous morning. He was busy at work with both a saw and his wand, sabotaging a bridge. A few members of the Order were supposed to cross it (when? Not sure, but he knew he had to do this first and then see about the platform in Hogsmeade, that was for certain). They wouldn’t be able to cross the bridge and that would force them to go through the path down the hill. A small change, but one that would make them go near the village and come across the Elderberry cousins. If Percy had it right the Elderberry would arrive in Hogwarts in time so that one could go do, what was it? He didn’t remember now but it was important that one were there early enough to help fight Rookwood and the other would be instrumental in saving Moody’s life, mostly because she? He? Didn’t take any excuses and I-feel-all-rights and would show you the treatment down your throat.

(If you resisted, there were other avenues also related to the digestive system where medicine could be introduced).

Hogwarts had always had breakfast early. Nowadays there were two turns, one for the older
inhabitants (teachers and refugees and all those kids that had grown so fast) and another for the younger children. It was just before the first turn that Severus made the announcement. McMillan was dead. Philip might be. They were going to assume that the castle was in danger and classes were cancelled today. He would let them know when it was appropriate to panic, for now they should keep calm and await instructions.

His words were followed by a heavy silence broken by a loud snap when a nervous Gryffindor broke the quill she had been clutching.

It might be a good sign that the biggest concern after the announcement, other than Philip, was whether or not they had to take down the decorations. Preparing the castle for battle and maybe siege was one thing, but the twins had just hung a five metres banner depicting Voldemort in the toilet and getting it there had been quite a hassle. Longbottom was unexpectedly loud about it, but he probably just wanted to make a distraction so people would be free to worry without being embarrassed or feeling like all eyes were on them. The girl who has broken her quill, or a toy wand she had been fidgeting with, whatever, had turned a deep red and she had the kind of pale skin that really showed a blush.

Besides, it’s not like they knew for certain that they were going to be attacked today. They had fooled them once already. Maybe, maybe they would do it again.

This wasn’t such a good thought as it might seem. Knowing for sure that an attack was coming was somehow preferable to this uncertainty.

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They were torturing the werewolf. They didn’t have to. The Dark Lord had rummaged through his mind as he pleased. He had seen enough to convince him that the betrayal was true and Snape was the most despicable traitor. He had had the wolf on his knees, screaming in pain and doing all he could to keep him out of his mind, to keep him from learning the truth.

There was no way to keep Voldemort out if he wanted inside your mind. You could hide your thoughts, make him not want to look as no doubt Snape had been doing; but you couldn’t keep him out when he was pushing in. There was no mind strong enough to withstand him.

Voldemort had screamed in rage as he left the room. Narcissa wasn’t sure what had happened, but in his fury he had broken all the windows and mirrors in the room and he had torn the door out of its hinges. He was now pacing in his sitting room, calling for all the monsters and all the men that had sworn him allegiance to come forward.

There was no need whatsoever to keep torturing that… man. There was no need to begin torturing him even, as the Dark Lord had already gotten everything he wanted from him before the first death eater drew out his wand. There was no point to the torture other than to cause suffering. Nothing that the man said would make it stop.

They were going to march over Hogwarts, Narcissa was sure of it. Voldemort had called for Snape and the Carrows to present themselves in the manor, but even if they did, he would march to the castle and kill everyone he found in there nonetheless.

Narcissa kept thinking about that. About how they would go about it, how many people would be sent and in which order. About the men laughing in her ballroom who would soon be fighting their way into a school to do much worse than what they were doing to the poor broken man on the floor.

The way they laughed, it was obscene. The way they tortured him when they needn’t to… And they
were all there. All of them. Her husband too.

All except Bellatrix. She was at her Lord’s side, helping him organize his forces and the deployment over Hogwarts. As much as Bellatrix would like to make the werewolf mad with pain, she was not there in the ballroom. She was where she was useful, doing what was best for the Dark Lord’s mission. She had even refrained from requesting to kill Snape herself and instead when her Lord told her to contact the giants she set to it.

Narcissa thought it meant something, that her sister was all business while everyone else played. It meant something that they would needlessly torture that man while there was a fire to stomp out and a betrayer to catch and kill. These were some of the most powerful wizards and witches in the country. Skilled fighters, people who knew all about the Dark Arts. But they were not preparing properly for the fight. They were pushing all their surprise and ire and fear, all their emotions, in the curses they were casting over that unfortunate man, like a Bacchanalia lasting too long. Many of them were still wearing their sleep clothes. Not Lucius, of course, he was properly dressed. But he hadn’t shaved and he was jumping and singing like the others, the most handsome bird ululating in the mad cage.

As far as she knew, only Narcissa had taken the time to bath, dress and have breakfast. She had taken a tray with tea to Voldemort but neither him nor Bellatrix had touched it. She had stayed in the room with them, quiet and still, for almost half an hour. The tea was now cold so Narcissa took the tray and left with it.

She heard a particularly piercing and penetrating exclamation as she crossed the corridor. She would have thought that it was Elisia but the woman could barely get more than a grunt nowadays. It might be Georgina Parkinson, laughing with pleasure.

The thing is, the man had died over an hour ago. Narcissa had been on her way to the kitchen to get the tea tray (she didn’t allow house-elves to touch the Dark Lord’s food) and she had seen them from outside the room. Standing at the feet of the stairs, she had looked across the lobby and the place where the door used to be, and she had seen as the man writhed while they levitated him up to the ceiling. His face was bruised and covered in blood and she had wished him dead while she clutched her wand.

The next time she saw him floating up, he was dead. She knew he was dead and he looked dead to her, but they were casting so many curses over him that Narcissa guessed it could look as if his body were still moving when it was just the momentum of the spells. They were yelling and laughing so loud that they couldn’t hear each other so they didn’t miss his screams of pain. Other than when Voldemort looked through his mind, he hadn’t been a screamer to begin with.

If there had been a short and faint flash of green, they certainly didn’t notice it between all the curses flying around. Not even Narcissa was sure she had seen it.

That had been then, when she went to get the tea. Now she let the tray with the teapot and the cups and the most delicate pastries over a console near the door. There were so many tables and consoles and corbels in the house. Each room had a love-seat and a settee and a dozen little tables around them with porcelain vases and delicate boxes.

Narcissa went up the stairs, past the room she shared with her husband and the room that Voldemort had claimed for himself. Past the bedroom she didn’t visit and all the way up to the aviary. She had seen and, more importantly, she had listened and now she knew what to do and what to say exactly.

The higher she was when she casted the patronus the sooner it would get lost in the clouds.
The message was brief and to the point. She didn’t waste any time in sentimentalities and thank-yous. It was a firm order more than a warning, followed by a short list of what was to come. It might seem like a death sentence or even like a taunt, but any Slytherin worth the name knew that information was useful even when it spoke of hopelessness. If anything, you would know not to waste your energy hoping and instead prepare for the end.

Information was good and she was sending it, and that was all she could do.

She didn’t— She didn’t know how she knew. She was no *legilimens*, that was for sure. She could not have grabbed the thought as *legilimens* sometimes did without even casting a spell. She was a good *occluder*, certainly, just as Severus had turned out to be. Was that it then? Had she recognized in Severus the same careful concealment that she had in herself? They had both won Voldemort’s trust and they had both betrayed it, and they had both loved the same man, or tried to love.

And at some point she had looked at him, her rival, that hateful half-blood man, and she had known.

She had no idea how. Even after she sent word of Bellatrix’s arrival to Hogwarts she couldn’t know for sure if Snape was a traitor. She had been very careful in her wording. She didn’t imply that they were in danger, merely stated what was coming. It might be that they had simply used her message to clean up the place, that it was taken as a courtesy and that Narcissa had been wrong about him.

But she hadn’t. And they didn’t take it as courtesy, didn’t they? They had done more than that.

They had been so clever, all the people in Hogwarts, so clever… So much so that now they might become arrogant. Voldemort was calling and, because he had managed to fool him until now, Snape would answer. He would come. He would tell some story that would explain everything perfectly, with that calm demeanour and that beautiful voice.

And he would die.

*He would die.* No lie of his would be good enough, not this time. Even here, all the way up in the tower, she could feel the hot pulse of his rage sweeping the manor.

Maybe that’s why everybody was acting like crazed animals. Could *legilimens* do that? Drown someone in their emotions?

It might had been when the mudblood escaped. Yes, that was it. That’s when Narcissa knew. Severus had come that morning because Lucius had called for him and when Lucius called no one refused him. No one refused Voldemort either, but it was a different sort of call altogether. At least it was now that Voldemort had such a hideous appearance.

(Such a thought. How could she allow herself to entertain the thought? They were still in the same house. She was taking terrible liberties.)

The Averys and the Lestrange brothers had been stuck in the little forest of thorns that Potter the squib had created and they were having trouble getting them out of it. Narcissa’s focus had been in keeping quiet and feigning she didn’t care when her sister spoke of Draco, told her he was alive and well and in Potter’s company.

Her heart had beaten then like the wings of a swan taking flight.

And she had seen, she must had seen… the barest glimpse, the smallest sign, a moment of recognition in Severus Snape, something that only she could see because only she was feeling it. Hidden in the corner of his mouth, that sour mouth of thin lips (just like hers), there had been an infinite amount of pride and relief as he touched that strange forest of thorns that Narcissa had
thought was quite pretty.

(Shes had cut a little branch and she kept it hidden in her underwear drawer.)

She had known without understanding, she had known and even now, when everyone downstairs thought they knew, even know Narcissa knew better. They thought that Snape was motivated by loyalty to Dumbledore or greed for himself, that he had believed the promises of honey from that old goat or that he wanted to make his own kingdom.

Narcissa knew better and she wasn’t telling, oh no. Someone who wanted power for himself would take risks but never so high as to come near death because with death they would lose everything. That kind of people would retreat and beg for mercy and above all they would try to save themselves.

But Snape was not that kind of man. Snape’s victory wasn’t his life, was it? He wouldn’t mind dying as long as Voldemort fell. He could die and still win and that was a completely different sort of opponent. Narcissa knew it and she wasn’t saying because she hoped with every fibre of her body that he would succeed. She had sent him a hopeless message, but she had hope.

She stayed in the tower until she couldn’t see the swan anymore, until it had blended with the off white clouds.

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They were almost done with breakfast. People had been divided between those that could hardly manage to swallow down a cup of tea or a small glass of juice and those who had loaded their plates with sausages and eggs in preparation for an exhausting day.

Severus had forced himself to eat as usual. Small glass of juice, piece of fruit, tea and toast. In front of him Sirius was eating as if he thought this would be the last time he would ever get to taste anything. (Not a huge amount, but each bite was relished with fervour). By his side Remus had picked a monstrosity made of chocolate “to help clear his head”.

Everybody was dealing as best they could. Pomona Sprout and Madam Pomfrey both had a thousand-yards stare. Understandable. Ernie had been a Hufflepuff, and Poppy knew that many other students would get hurt. On a corner of the table Hagrid was staring at his tea and eating mechanically. From time to time professor Slughorn elbowed him gently to remind him to keep eating. Slughorn had taken the hedonist route and was eating the most fantastic omelette accompanied with a single shot of liquor.

To his left Minerva was eating as if not doing so were a particularly personal insult. The way she spread butter over her toast or stirred her tea spoke of a profound indignation. It was the fear. Minerva always got particularly worked up with the fear and terror as she considered them the worst kind of attack. Having someone come and attempt to kill her was one thing, but having them try to make her feel afraid? To suffer hours before the event? Oh, no. None of that. This is also why she always dismissed Trelawney’s yearly predictions of a student’s death. If you were to die, so be it, but there was no need to die in spirit long before the fact.

She was the Head of Gryffindor. She would not have the school tainted with the acrid smell of terror.

She put the tea cup down in the saucer, making a very gentle “clink” sound. “Don’t even think about it” she said to Severus firmly, very firmly. The tone with which she dealt with the worst kind of mischievous students. The tone reserved for Filch’s most dramatic tantrums. The tone she had used when Black played that prank. Severus felt himself swallow and tense instantly, because he might be
Headmaster of Hogwarts now, but he had been her student far longer.

The table was lost in its own thoughts, but Sirius raised his electric blue eyes and looked at Severus while he kept eating, like a dog laying in the sun that raises an attentive ear. Remus too had turned oh so slightly and looked at the two of them curiously with eyes that were so gentle and kind that Severus couldn’t stand looking at them right now.

“No” Minerva said. “Just no, Severus. No.”

The twins’ theory that she had some secret power of clairvoyance got new strength. How had she noticed? The whole table, the whole Great Hall, was distracted and Severus was being exquisitely discreet. How could she notice when Madam Pomfrey, trained healer, had not?

The mark on Severus’ left forearm was burning. At first it had been easy to ignore, but the brand was Voldemort’s spell, created by him and casted only by him. When he had invented it so that he could call his followers, he had not left space for rebellion and disregard. The mark now burned with a white heat, hot and intense, taking all over his arm from the palm to the head of the shoulder.

It was not the pain. He could ignore the pain, intense as it was. He could get something for it, plus Pomfrey’s apprentices had been investigating Chang’s solution of casting *glacio* to stop the worst of a curse. As long as he had free use of his right arm Severus could work and ignore the fire taking over his left arm. It was not the pain.

It was that Voldemort was calling and he was thinking of answering.

It made quite a lot of sense. Philip, or whatever had taken him because it was hard to believe he was a traitor, must have arrived to Voldemort with quite a lot to say. This was why Voldemort was now calling for him with such insistence and the longer Severus delayed the answer the worst it would look. The Dark Lord had believed him before, had wanted to believe Severus, saw him as one of his favourites. Was it so outlandish that if Severus went to him he would not believe him once more? Severus’ lies were sweet and fresh. Would he really reject them this time?

Perhaps. Perhaps the trust was broken and Voldemort would not take any excuses. Perhaps this time nothing that came from Severus’ mouth would be admitted. But perhaps not, and Severus thought it was extremely selfish not to at least try. How could he stay in the school and make everyone fight without going there first and seeing if he could change the world once more with a lie?

“I can see you thinking” Minerva hissed. “I will *petrificus totalus* you myself, Severus. You are not going anywhere.”

“I don’t know what this is about” said Sirius putting down one of his six different glasses of juice. “But I can sit on top of him if you want me to, Minerva.”

Remus said nothing, but he put a warm and heavy hand on his thigh. Just a hand, and it was stronger than any chain.

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“Good morning, sir” said Percy Weasley with his usual tone of bureaucratic politeness as the back door to *The Hog’s Head* opened for him. The pub didn’t open for business until the afternoon.

Alberforth Dumbledore gave a grunt that could be interpreted as a greeting.

“As per the new Ministerial Resolution for Hostelry, all business owners and/or managers must have a standardized BK800 item in the premises. I am hereby delivering the cited implement so your
establishment will be in accordance with ordinance.”

Percy lifted the big and heavy bucket to signal that it was the standardized BK800 item. He put it back down, although a little bit closer to Alberforth.

“This is a bucket” Alberforth pointed. He managed to express how low were his opinions on the Ministry, regulations in general, and Percy Weasley, in just those four words. While his brother Albus had been a man of genial disposition, Alberforth was sour and bitter.

“Ah, no, sir” Percy answered easily. This was just as when he had started to work in cauldron legislation. People refused to acknowledge the importance of standardization and minimum requirements. “It is a metal container with an open top and flat bottom as described in the rules for BK500 to BK900 vessels, with a supplement designed to facilitate holding and carrying it.”

Alberforth stared at Percy in disbelief before quickly adopting the general look of resignation of those confronted with the absurd logic of bureaucrats. He bended to take the bucket by the handle and bring it in.

Percy was already stepping away, satisfied with how quickly he had solved this, when Alberforth’s voice called him again. Albus, or rather, Dumbledore, because he was the one people thought about when the name was mentioned, had had a nice voice, profound and majestic and clear. Alberforth’s voice was like crumpled paper and broken glass.

“This bucket is full of grain and wine” he said and at the same time he sounded as if he had dropped and handful of rusty nails in said bucket.

“I can assure you, sir, it is just as established by the regulation.”

“Is the Ministry expecting many attacks of African firebirds in English pubs?”

Ah.

“I, hum, I wouldn’t know sir. I am not in the Department of Magical Creatures.”

“Because wheat grain soaked in wine is used to tame firebirds.”

Because, really, even if Albus had once said rather unkindly that he wasn’t sure whether Alberforth knew how to read and write, Alberforth was far from being a moron. As it turned out, he was aware of the terribly obscure process for capturing and taming the equally exotic firebirds. Percy just knew he had to deliver the bucket, he didn’t completely understand why. He just knew that the bucket’s absence meant a roof on fire, a stone tower that grew so hot that it crumbled, and a room with the floor covered in blood. It meant six perfectly preventable deaths.

“I am sure that the Ministry took into consideration many reasons when drawing up this rule” said Percy, his voice faltering a little bit. Firebirds. A bit like a phoenix but with a propensity to burning down fields and buildings. The cannonballs of nature.

“Did it? And what considerations were those?”

Percy coughed and took a breath to ground himself. Usually he was much better at avoiding question but he was tired and hungry and very impatient. “Considerations” he bit over the word “from the trusted advisors of the Minister. Sir, if you are question the Ministry’s decision or my authority I will have to write you up.”

“I was merely expressing my curiosity” Alberfoth answered in a tone that rather than sugary was like
cheap saccharin. “It is not everyday that a humble innkeeper like myself gets a personal visit from the Junior Assistant to the Minister, and to deliver me an eight hundred bucket, too.”

When all this was done, Percy was going to go very far away where no one spoke English.

“Mr. Dumbledore” he said for all answer before nodding and disappearing.

Alberfoth took the bucket. That was what mattered.

***

The *patronus* arrived as they were beginning to organize. Since they still didn’t know the nature of the attack or if there was going to be an attack at all (who knew? Maybe Voldemort wouldn’t want to damage his beloved Hogwarts. Maybe Severus would dodge Minerva and everyone else and go to him and fix it all with a pretty lie), for now they were quickly reviewing their resources and listing ideas. Madam Pomfrey was glad to say that since she had been stocking up on medicine and training a few volunteers, she could offer medical assistance to more than a third of the castle at the same time. Professor Slughorn had an adequate supply of antidotes ready. They had created enough *protego*-imbued cloaks to dress thirty six people.

The sky was the usual white-grey of English winters, so they didn’t notice it at first as the *patronus* descended in circles towards them.

It was a beautiful swan. Elegant and majestic and with a hidden strength in each flap of its wings. It spoke with a voice that was soft and sad and Severus couldn’t believe that they had thought that it had been his. He was sure he had never sounded like that, so dreadfully beautiful and sad.

After it delivered its message the *patronus* vanished in soft tendrils of silver mist that were just like the voice. Tender and fragile and so easily torn apart and broken.

Severus was a spy. He hadn’t wanted to be, his interests had always been in potions and music, but when he had become one he had strived to be one of the best. The *patronus* was gone but he could recite the message almost word for word: *He knows. Don’t come. He will kill you. He prepares to attack Hogwarts. No mercy. Giants. Werewolves. Vampires. Harpies. Firebirds. Dementors. Wizards only at the end.*

Not only did Severus remember all of it, he still had enough attention to notice Remus making a signal to the twins. For some unfathomable reason Remus hadn’t been satisfied with Severus’ assurance to Minerva that he wasn’t going anywhere and had made the twins shadow him in preparation for more drastic measures. “Yes, why would I resort to such underhanded methods” was all Remus had to say on the topic.

In any case, they couldn’t dwell too much on it. The message was a wonderful gift even if it painted a terrible picture. Wave after wave of creatures that could cross Hogwart’s defences and that would seep out all of their energies before Voldemort and his deatheaters stepped in. Even if Hogwart’s defendants caused a great deal of damage to Voldemort’s forces, he wouldn’t withdraw or step back because he didn’t care about all those dark creatures he was sending first. They were just a convenient method of injuring them and tiring them out before he decided to engage. They could kill them all and Voldemort wouldn’t care.

It was unexpectedly practical and ruthless, like the duellist that poisons his opponent the previous night. It was the kind of plan Lovegood would come up with. He had never though that Voldemort possessed such inventive.
Then again, that the message had come from Narcissa Malfoy was also unexpected and so surprising as to be bewildering. It seemed to Severus that it would be best not to think much about expectations and predictions and slim chances of victory and instead just set to work because who could tell what was else would happen?

(“She was the model girl of the family” whispered Sirius in the background).

“Dementors shouldn’t be a problem” Ron was saying, already clearing a table to draw up a plan. “But I have no idea of how to deal with vampires. I think Charlie was the last in the family to study them.”

“… a considerable reserve of aconite” Slughorn was telling Sprout.

“Study earrings” Luna was showing the twins a pair of earrings shaped like eagles’ heads. “To cancel the noise. I think they just have a muffliato in them, only people can see that you can’t hear anything. I think we should work in shifts, and with them people could get some sleep.”

“Of course beheading would work. It works with every creature, not just vampires.”

“We have armours. Vampires can’t fight someone in armour.”

“If a humble student can intervene in the council” announced Theodore Nott whose baseline mode of speaking was something between a gibe and sarcasm. “Parkinson has finally snapped and she is hugging Lavender Brown to death. Patil too. Not the nerd one, the other one. She is also hugging.”

The Dark Lord wanted all of his army available so all of his army he would have. However, this was going to take a bit of time because the army was scattered all over his territory and only wizards were able to apparate instantly. It wasn’t mere apparition, though. Bellatrix was finding that some of His followers were less eager than her to jump to action and what’s more, that mere will and devotion wasn’t enough to shorten distances.

The vice-governor of Ireland, (the governor wasn’t available when they called), said he could easily send them as many giants as they wanted and he hoped to do it in a timely manner if that was their wish. That wasn’t a problem. The problem would be bringing them back to the island because the locals, barbarians that they were, kept fighting the death eaters sent to clean the wizarding population and once the giants were out they wouldn’t let them back in, they just wouldn’t.

Losing the giants meant a weaker grip of the conquered territory and, in the shorter term, a very long rant from the vice-governor regarding the savagery of the locals and a recount of every little sign of opposition he had faced. Not only the pureblood families were not being cooperative (inexplicable), but it seemed that they were working with muggles.

Bellatrix believed it, they were all little more than smart animals, of course they would work together.

Apparently the muggles, all of them, kept more in contact and had tighter nets of communication than wizards, which allowed the Irish wizards to receive support from the continent. Just two weeks ago Diggory had been spotted there even though their intel said he was in Norway planning an attack on Azkaban.

But Bellatrix didn’t care about that now. Voldemort wanted giants and he would have his giants to bring Hogwarts to the ground. They would think about the stupid island and their stupid dirty wizards later, and if they gave any trouble they would be crushed like a bug under a shoe until all opposition ceased.
The governor of Gibraltar had been more helpful even if they did have to endure his accent. A flock of firebirds would arrive to England in just a few hours, he was recruiting bands of trolls and the portkeys would be ready in a matter of minutes if only they got some special permissions from the Department of Transport. Bella was sure they wouldn’t give them back and that they would use them for smuggling. But Voldemort hadn’t minded, pleased at the mention of a whole flock of firebirds.

There were some letters. Letters written by his own hand and bearing his seal. Orders for the Ministry to prepare for the arrival of the damned giants, to give the blanket permission to that crook in Gibraltar (it didn’t matter, they would take it back), to call the dementors from Azkaban and the Wizengamot and to expedite the way to Hogwarts for all the troops. The last order still held a bit of the warmth of his hand, or so Bellatrix wanted to believe as she held them close to her chest. She would go dispatch them now.

As she went to take the stairs to the top floors and the aviary she noticed the breakfast tray abandoned in a side table. The people in the ballroom had only now realized that the werewolf was dead (amateurs, she would have kept him alive for weeks) and were debating whether or not to paint something with his blood.

But the tray…

Here is a funny thing about the Black family. Most of them were Slytherins. They would like to say that all of them (Sirius didn’t count, neither did Andromeda) and they would also like to say that it was so because they were perfectly pureblooded, and Slytherin was the house for pureblood families.

The truth is that most of them were Slytherins because they were gifted with a certain intuitive knowledge, a deep ability for discerning and noticing the unseen. Andromeda saw it at times in her daughter, even if it wasn’t very strong. Regulus had it to the utmost degree. Narcissa had it. Bellatrix had it.

So, despite the betrayal that had the house in chaos and her duty to Voldemort and the raucous party in the ballroom, Bellatrix saw an abandoned tea tray and thought that she hadn’t seen her sister for a while and that it was very much unlike her to leave the tray there.

She held that thought while she went up the stairs with the letters firmly held in her left hand and her wand in the right. With each step she twisted the thought a bit more until eventually something leaked of it.

***

Narcissa was the cleverest out of all the three Black sisters. Given how quiet she was, nobody would have expected it. She really didn’t look like much yet she was one point smarter than Bella. One point wasn’t a lot but given how smart Bella was, it was plenty for general purposes. Narcissa also had the added advantage of not being insane, even if her mind had endured some great strain in the last few years.

“What were you doing?” Bellatrix asked her as Narcissa came down from the spiral stairs that took to the aviary. Bella was standing in the door, almost crowding Narcissa in the narrow landing. Bellatrix had taken a very good spot, lots of empty space on her back if she had to move or dodge while Narcissa could only go back up and not very far.

Narcissa looked at her calmly, a bit like a sheep or a cow.

“What?” she said, like a little girl that greets an older sister she doesn’t understand and is afraid of. Like a little girl that still plays with dolls and is forced to share a table with a young woman who
nowadays plays with boys and with blood.

“What. Were. You. Doing.” Bella was still careful not to crumple the letters given to her by the Dark Lord, but her grip on her wand tightened, the points of her fingers turning white.

Narcissa considered for a second and because she was just one point smarter she saw that Bellatrix didn’t know. She didn’t know but she suspected something and she wouldn’t stop until she got an answer because her insanity made her inhumanly persistent. Narcissa could lie and maybe Bellatrix would believe her and maybe not. The actual fact was that in this Bellatrix didn’t matter, she wasn’t the one who worried Narcissa.

She made a decision. She was smarter.

“Sending some letters, evidently.” She said, knowing that she sounded nervous and weak and like a terrible liar. It was unbelievable that Narcissa Black Malfoy would lie so badly, but Bella thought her stupid so she would take it. She would think that she was so much cleverer and could spot her sister’s clumsy lies.

“What letters?” Bellatrix tilted her head and a strand of black hair fell over that beautiful corner between neck and shoulder. “Who do you need to write to? Everyone you know is here.”

Narcissa lowered her gaze, and bit her lip.

“Not everyone… Honestly, Bella, it is nothing. You shouldn’t concern yourself.”

“Who, Narcissa. Tell me who.”

“It’s just… Lucius and I, we have been having problems, and… but really, it is nothing that affects you.”

“A lover? You expect me to believe you have a lover?”

No, no, no. If she did, it would be wonderful, but she didn’t expect it, no.

“Honestly, Cissy, how stupid is that? Expelliarmus.”

The wand jumped from Narcissa’s hand. She hadn’t expected it but she wouldn’t have been able to stop it even if she did. This was Bella. Who could best Bella in a duel?

Bellatrix could hardly hold the letters plus Narcissa’s wand in one hand. One of the letters slip her grip and floated gently to the floor, another had creased.

“Priori incantato” said Bella, pointing at her sister’s wand, and right away the ghost of the last spell, the patronus, came over the wand like a beacon.

“Expecto patronus” Bellatrix looked surprised and a bit lost. “But there aren’t any dementors around…”

The words hung in there. Narcissa waited in silence for Bellatrix to figure it out. She couldn’t go back up, nor would she achieve anything by doing so. She might try to push forward and pray that Bella were so confused that she suddenly became a useless fighter and let her through, but she would have the same problem later only in a corridor rather than the stairs.

Today of all days any strange behaviour, any suspicion, would find not Bella’s and McNair’s special interrogation but Voldemort himself going through your mind. Today even if she managed to fool
Bella the encounter would linger in her mind and Voldemort would notice it. Narcissa had seen him do it plenty of times, getting stray thoughts from the people around him, even when he hadn’t uttered a word or moved his wand. He would see Narcissa’s lie in Bellatrix’ mind and even if he believed it too, he would still turn to look at the source, get the details directly from Narcissa’s mind.

Narcissa couldn’t have that. She didn’t know if her message would really help Snape, she hoped it did, she hoped it allowed him to prepare better for the attack; but she knew for certain that if they learned he had been warned they would change their plan and then he would have nothing.

“You used it to send a message” Bellatrix said slowly, the words falling from her full mouth like pearls, “just like the Order used to do. Dumbledore’s invention.”

The Chinese had been doing it for centuries, but fine, Dumbledore’s invention.

Narcissa gave a tiny step back and put one of her hands, (beautiful, beautiful hands, no other witch had hands like hers) over her belly and over her heart. It is well known: The best way to lie is to say the truth, just a different truth.

She would have her believe that she was contacting Draco, protecting him, which was true enough. Let her think that she had written to him and not to the man that, she knew, would save him. Snape would protect Draco, like he had done after Lucius had that bout of temper and punished him. Plus, Draco was with Potter and Snape was protecting Potter. He would also look after Draco.

“It’s that traitor son of yours, isn’t it? You have been helping him, telling him to move when we got close.”

Hold that thought, Bella. Hold that thought and forget about Snape and his true motivations. If you don’t know what your enemies truly wants then you don’t know how they will act. So hold that thought and think about a lost boy.

(If they hadn’t found him yet, wandless and underage, they would not find him now almost turned into a man. Narcissa knew that, so let Bella waste her attention in him and forget about the man who dared to lie.)

All that remained now was ensuring that Voldemort didn’t learn about this, that he didn’t force the truth out of Narcissa, that he wouldn’t even know that there was a truth to find.

“You know, Bella” said Narcissa Malfoy, Narcissa Black, with sudden hardness in her voice. “I don’t like you. You are my sister but I don’t think that I have ever liked you.”

“You think that because you are my sister I will treat you differently?” Bella gave a step forward, still blocking the door. The letters were all on the floor now or terribly creased as her hands tightened into fists. Her emotions always got over her whenever they discussed Draco.

“In fact” Narcissa said, daring for once to interrupt Bella. “I don’t think anyone likes you. I don’t, Lucius doesn’t, Severus doesn’t, none of the other death eaters like you, not a single one of them. They might fear you but they don’t like you. I think your husband might have liked you before your wedding, but never after that.”

“Shut up!”

“And I know that he doesn’t like you” said Narcissa with such coldness that it must had been true. “He will use you and will bed you, but to him you are nothing more than a house-elf serving him, a whiny, irritating house-elf. And nobody loves house-elves, Bella.”
“Shut up! Flagelo!”

Narcissa side stepped the curse easily. The wall behind her cracked with the impact. There had always been such potency in Bella’s spells. People spoke of Grindewald and Dumbledore and Voldemort, but Narcissa had never seen something quite like her.

“Do you know who he likes?” she went on, because she couldn’t afford to give her any respite. Not a second to think and call others. If Lucius came, he would stop her. If he came, he would stop Bella and he would take Narcissa down to Voldemort who would rummage through her mind and see everything and afterwards, Lucius would crucio Narcissa to death. He would talk some sense into Bella and they would go slowly about it, just as they had gone with that poor wolf boy.

“Me.” The word in Narcissa’s mouth, that mouth with too sad and too thin lips, was like a gunshot. “Do you know who else he likes? Severus Snape.”

Bella gave a step back as if she had been stabbed.

“Even now you can hear him rage. You can hear him bleed from the betrayal because he cares, Bella, he cares more than he ever cared about you. If he cared even a little bit he would have listened when you warned him.”

“Whore! Whore! Shut up!”

“You know it’s true”

“No! No, no, no! Traitor. Poison. Your words are poison, I don’t believe you, I don’t hear them.”

She was right, the words were poison. She was also wrong, she believed each and every one of them.

“On the contrary, my dear. I am very loyal.” Narcissa spoke softly and calmly. She had always envied Severus Snape’s control over his voice but today she managed to sound like the touch of rose petals.

“I saw you! Betrayer! Liar! Liar!”

“I never said that I was loyal to him. Never took the mark or swore an oath.” Narcissa knew what was coming. Even if she had had her wand in her hand she knew that against Bella it would be nothing more than an expensive twig and it would do her little good. She had her voice though, and a mind that was sharper than anyone thought, and the resolution to protect her son and the man helping him at all costs.

“I am loyal to my son, Bella” she said with the strength of someone who speaks the most absolute truth, something reserved to the gods, “and I will do everything in my hand to keep him away from harm. If you were a mother you would understand.”

It was a terrible blow. It was the worst thing Narcissa could have said and she knew it very well. No insult to Voldemort, no offence to the cause, would awake in Bella such blind fury as the reminder that she could not bear him a son.

(She had always been so sure that if only she could conceive, he would have loved her then).

There was flash of green light and a sound like that of a body falling to the floor. Then there was only silence and the sobs of a woman.
Narcissa died without fear or pain. Bellatrix regretted it immediately not because it was her sister but because a traitor deserved a bigger and longer punishment. Narcissa for her part only regretted the years she could not protect Draco better, the pain he suffered at Lucius’ hands. But she was content in the knowledge that she had done better now. She had fought those who would harm her son and helped those who would protect him when she couldn’t. She had gotten a clean death, free of torture. She felt like she couldn’t ask for more.

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There was a ring of bells as the door to the store opened. The clerk looked up at the flustered young man who came in. It seemed like the wind had picked up, because his hair was a disaster, an explosion of orange curls.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Afternoon, lad. What do you need?”

“Is—is it already? Afternoon?”

“Gone two hours past noon. How can I help you?”

“Oh, dear… Oh, Mer—I’m losing track of time.”

He looked very upset about it, and like he hadn’t gotten much sleep recently.

“Yep, happens to all of us. Work and work and no time for yourself. You have to live in the country to appreciate time, that’s what my father always said. Now tell me, how can I help you?”

“Yes… Um…” He pointed. “Could I, could I get that one? With the black handle?”

“This one? It has a fibreglass handle to absorb vibrations and the head is carbon steel. Very durable. But listen, boy, if you are just doing some simple repairs at home…” He glanced at the young man who looked like the heaviest thing he had ever lifted might be a small flowerpot or a couple of books. “you might want this one better. General purpose. Rubber grip so it won’t slip. Much cheaper.”

“I… thank you, I… I like the other one. It also has rubber grip, right?”

“Yes, of course. That one is much better. Just know, I don’t take advantage of my clients. Other might, but I don’t like it. It may not be what you need.”

“Yes, yes. Certainly. Thank you. Much appreciated. But I like that one. How much is it?”

“26.99 pounds.”

“Yes, here.” He hurriedly got a fifty pounds note. “Oh, and the nails. Do you have iron nails?”

“All nails are steel nowadays, lad.” The clerk said patiently. Kids these days didn’t even know how to hang a picture.

“But do you have some iron ones?”

“I might have some old ones in the back. But they are not good. The ones that don’t break, they bend.”

“That’s all right. I will take them.”
So he went and got some unsellable old iron nails which the young man attempted to take in the nest of his arms and, when that didn’t work, on his shirt. He looked very grateful when he was given a plastic bag for his purchase and he left without waiting for the change.

“Well, someone has broken something old and is in a hurry to repair it” the store clerk thought to himself.

***

The mark had stopped burning at midmorning. Voldemort had finally accepted that Severus was not coming. The absence of pain was a relief but Severus couldn’t help thinking that now that Voldemort wasn’t calling he would be focusing his attention in preparing the attack.

Then again, Severus knew Voldemort was still a bit upset. Lovegood had remembered the Carrows’ box, the one they had been using to keep the charade up. When they opened it Severus found a very nasty message from the Dark Lord addressed to him in which he was informed that no amount of begging would spare his life together with very specific threats and commentary to his ancestry.

The most feared wizard in the world reduced to sending insulting messages. Luna’s face had been delightful.

But he was coming. Silly angry messages or not, he was coming and the fact was worsened by the knowledge that they couldn’t kill him, not unless all the other horcruxes had been destroyed and they knew this was not the case.

He couldn’t be killed but perhaps he could be injured and in any case they were all certain that they were not going to flee, they would not abandon Hogwarts and its treasures. More importantly, they would not make Harry the sole responsible in defeating Voldemort. That wasn’t fair.

But, just as it wasn’t fair that a child (seventeen already, but a child) had to vanquish Voldemort, it wasn’t fair for all the other children in the school either. They shouldn’t have to be dragged into battle.

This very sensible thought managed to open two very ugly discussions.

The first one was with the children themselves who felt like they were mature and informed enough to choose to stay and fight. Those who had turned seventeen already said they were not going anywhere, followed by the sixths years who said that “sixteen is the new seventeen, professor” and since the riots had generated mostly from the fifth years at the time the current fifth years said they were staying too.

The fourth years tried to argue that Potter had participated in the Triwizard Tournament at that age, but they were dismissed. In the end, only those who looked old enough to pass as fifth years managed to stay. Everyone else was deemed too young. Mostly, if you couldn’t evade the twins’ grappling then you had no business staying and were put in a room to wait. They would all be evacuated before nightfall, get them as far away from the school as possible and, above all, without being discovered. No one wanted to know what would happen if the deatheaters realized they were taking the children away.

Cho Chang had drawn a map and written down a code. She would be staying but thought that if they managed to contact Diggory and Krum, they would help take the children to Europe and house them there. No matter what happened tonight in Hogwarts, those kids would survive.

It remained only the question of who would take them. Evidently the kids couldn’t go alone but they
also couldn’t spare many adults to go with them. Not when every able wizard and witch would be needed tonight.

And here came the argument number two, because Severus had it very clear who should be in charge of the kids whereas that person did not see it that way.

“No.” Remus said. “For Merlin’s sake, no. I am the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, I am the last person that should go. Take Amanda and Aurora. They are sensible and tough.”

“If you think that there should be two people then choose someone to help you, but you are going.”

“Of course I am not, Severus! I am not leaving you here.”

“This is not open to discussion. You are going.” Severus said in a final tone with some hints of irritation.

“Not open to discussion?” Remus exclaimed, opening his eyes. “Have you gone mad?”

“I believe I have made myself clear.” Severus answered trying hard to keep calm.

“Very.” Remus was oozing that acrid politeness he used as defence. “I am still not going and I don’t care how many times you repeat that nonsense.”

The fight was ugly and more upsetting than the oncoming battle. It was like seeing your parents fight about something obscure that you don’t understand. You just want them to stop. Stop and please be nice.

“I am the DADA teacher! I am an expert on dark creatures and you have got a message telling you that he is going to use them!” There was something in Remus’ voice and a wet quality in his eyes that was absolutely heartbreaking. He had been rejected so many times in his life, and now this. “You need me here.”

“Come on Moony, don’t be an ass and give this to him will you?” Sirius said as he finished laying his old charmed spiderweb over the entrance to one of the secret tunnels. “He just wants to make sure that you survive and are there for Harry.”

Remus stopped midsentence and blinked in surprise. Severus looked like he was about to throw up and he also looked like Sirius was saying the truth.

This… this was quite unbalancing. Remus was used to being right. He was the one who reigned Sirius back when he was being impulsive, the one who told the twins not to when they got an idea that was extra mad, the one who told Severus not to be dense and stop denying happiness for himself. He was always right. It was very strange to suddenly not be.

“But.”

“I’m staying” Sirius went on. His eyes had a spark in them that foretold nothing good. “I have already decided, if we lose I am blowing myself up and taking everyone I can with me. Make as much damage as I can. On that note” he added, rising his voice for everyone around to hear. “Dibs on Lucius Malfoy. He is mine.”

The Slytherins working nearby applying wax to one flight of stairs (as good as destroying them) looked up startled. It hadn’t occurred to them that you could claim people and now Black had gone and demanded Lucius.
“Can he do that?”

“Dibs on Parkinson’s father!” screamed Theodore Nott, mostly because he enjoyed messing with her.

“No, you don’t!” Pansy yelled back. She was about to punch him in the arm but he sidestepped her quickly.

“Dibs is dibs.” Theo said smugly as Pansy fumed. In the background, Zabini was nodding his head as if this made sense to him. The Ancient Law of Duel Dibs.

“Dibs on Bellatrix Lestrange” Pansy said then, not loudly, but enunciating very clearly.

“You can’t get dibs on Bella” Sirius told her, still standing next to Severus and a Remus with wet shining eyes. “She is the best duellist of our time. She would kill you in a blink. None of you tadpoles fight her, you hear me? She is too big, I don’t want any of you crossing paths with her.”

“He is right” said Remus, after clearing his throat. Probably because with one look Severus had taken his heart from his chest and lifted it all the way there. “Lestrange should be let to adults.”

“I am going to kill her” Pansy said through gritted teeth.

“Pansy, dear, no. Besides, you are not even family. She is my cousin.”

“Then give back your dibs on Malfoy.”

“Never.”

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“It seems like it has been shut down for months” said Draco reasonably. He was a very reasonable person. The most reasonable of his immediate peers, that was for sure.

“Just a quick look?” Hermione begged. “I know it sounds absurd and that the shop is closed, but I just have this—this nagging feeling that George needs something.”

It was perfectly illogical and so Hermione had a lot of trouble trying to describe the burning sensation in the back of her mind, a soft but insistent pull that she should go find George Weasley immediately because he had gotten himself in trouble.

She was not the only one feeling that way. Oliver Wood had a similar feeling, only in his case was Fred. Fred Weasley needed help. Why would he suddenly think that? He didn’t know.

Oliver had had a bit of hard year. He had it better than most, so he wasn’t complaining, but the year had been hard. Oliver just wanted to play Quidditch, it was all he cared about, and more and more people were interfering with it and ruining the enjoyment.

First, Oliver was handsome and even if he didn’t have a particularly heroic chin he had a beautiful sunny smile and he was a Gryffindor so the Ministry was pressuring him to make public statements and lend his image to counteract the Krum/Diggory campaign. Oliver didn’t want to do that, he just wanted to play Quidditch, but saying “no” was becoming more and more difficult as the pressure increased.

At the same time, simply saying “no” wasn’t enough for some people, so Oliver got used to getting dirty looks because he didn’t take a defiant stance like Diggory. Apparently, as a Gryffindor, he was
expected to openly denounce the government and get himself killed in a public duel or something.

This wasn’t even the worst part. He could ignore all that as long as he still got to play. When he was in the air or when he was planning strategies and moves, it didn’t matter what other people thought or said. He had been training hard and giving all in the game, keeping a good average overall even when he knew he wasn’t playing his very best due to the stress. Still, the captain had told him that he might have to bench him for the next few games. Lucius Malfoy had strongly suggested that it would benefit the team’s performance and Malfoy knew nothing of Quidditch so they had all understood what his words really meant. They probably weren’t going to completely cut him out of the team, but they would reduce his time playing and that meant that Oliver would have less opportunities to really shine and he certainly wouldn’t get a bonus.

That might be the worst thing, or what felt bitterest to Oliver. He had always liked playing for the game’s sake, for the strategy and the wonderful rush of the victory and the delight of a game well played. Now he couldn’t even have that because he was thinking about performance objectives and bonuses. He hated it. He hated the idea of a bonus because you shouldn’t need one to play your best, but the thing was that he really needed those bonuses. Oliver needed all the money he could earn.

There was something that was making his year difficult. Difficult isn’t the same as hard. It means that there was some sort of struggle that Oliver had to overcome, but he didn’t suffer for it or he suffered agreeably.

Last Year, at the start of the season Oliver had rented a semi-detached house with two bedrooms and one full bathroom plus a half bathroom that was a serious life saver. It was more space than what a single young man needed, but the extra room might be used by friends and family visiting so it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary and Oliver had liked the location.

And in that house, with two bedrooms and one bathroom and a half, and nosy neighbours on one side, Oliver was hiding five people wanted by the Ministry.

This was the difficult thing that Oliver did happily and the reason why he was so short on money.

It had started with Angelina Johnson and Penelope Clearwater knocking on his door in the middle of the night. It had been back when Dumbledore was alive and Voldemort wasn’t so visible so they all pretended nothing bad was really happening. Bad things were happening though and Oliver ushered the girls inside without questions. Penelope left a few weeks later. She had contacts in the Ministry and through them they got her in a transport to Calais. She returned to England in April and had been working from another house forging papers for the halfbloods.

Angelina stayed and Penelope was soon replaced by Katie Bell who came to them with just the clothes on her back, desperately trying to stop a bleeding gush in her abdomen. Oliver had a game that day so he had to go and play and pretend nothing was wrong, not knowing if when he returned home later that day he would find Katie, one of his chasers, one of his girls, dead.

He didn’t. She had survived and Oliver had been so angry and so worried that he had stopped each and every one of the quaffles sent his way, and even the bludger. He got a nice bonus that allowed him to buy health potions without the alchemist writing down his name.

The next day Alicia Spinnet and Elizabeth Pine, who had been a Chaser too, came to the house not daring to ask whether Katie had managed to arrive the day before.

They were all his players, his wonderful girls. Oliver had kept them all even if there was no space and they couldn’t go out or make much noise in case the Critchleys next door heard them and informed the Ministry.
And two weeks ago they had also welcomed a half-dead Lee Jordan. It had been a very close call, both because Lee had been severely wounded and because he had left a trail. There had been Special Operators and even a branded death eater going down the street investigating and that same afternoon Oliver had sent an owl to the team’s spokesman telling him yes to the bloody interview with The Prophet. He would say whatever they wanted. In fact they could go ahead and write whatever answers they liked and he would sign it.

As a Gryffindor, Oliver would have liked to go the Diggory route and keep saying no and maybe duel someone. That would certainly help with the rage. But sometimes courage is not in a big fight, but in doing it again, and again, and again, day after day, secret and hidden.

In any case, today Oliver was coming home thinking about Fred Weasley and the biting feeling that he might be in trouble. He was greeted by Angelina who, as one of the few who had managed to keep her wand, was always the one who came to the lobby.

“Hey Oliver. Weird question, but I have got like a sudden presage or something. Have you heard anything of the twins, lately? Of Fred? I have a bad feeling about Fred.”

Oliver took a careful breath. A good Keeper had to keep a clear head at all times and above all don’t fall for the feints.

“Did you take Divination?” he asked “you didn’t, did you?”

“No, I… It’s just weird. Alicia made us all a cup of tea and is looking at the leaves, but she only took Divination one year.”

“I tell you, we have to go!” came a broken voice from upstairs followed by adamant hushing. They really couldn’t make any noise.

“And Lee is going crazy because he thinks the twins are in trouble and he wants us all to go.” Added Angelina.

“But he can barely stand!”

“That’s what we are telling him, but he is frantic and, I don’t know, he is getting to me. I just have this nagging feeling that I should go get Fred.”

***

Marcus Flint found Suruchi Sudabar waiting outside. This was unexpected because they hadn’t mixed that much and there was no reason why she would know where Marcus’ family lived. Unexpected, but not surprising.

She was dressed with trousers and a thick jacket and her long hair was braided and stuffed inside a hat that tied with a ribbon under her chin. She looked cute and ready for combat. Marcus noted that rather than heels, her boots had a flat and thick sole. Given how careful Sudabar was about her appearance, this meant something important.

“You got the call, too, eh Flint.” She said. She kept her back very straight and her tummy tucked in, like dancers do. “I felt something from the Patil sisters, but no Slytherins. Can you believe it?”

“Zabini” Marcus said. “Gregory Goyle, Graham Montague, Mafalda Pewtter and Luciana Fowle.”

Sudabar looked surprised but quickly accepted it. Marcus Flint had always been well liked in Slytherin. He was not a model student, but he was good enough at Quidditch and if anyone went to
him with a problem he would beat up the cause of said problem.

“They are… sixth and seventh years, right?” Suruchi said. “In Hogwarts.”

Marcus nodded. “Father says that they are preparing to attack tomorrow morning. He is going to grant his brand to the survivors of the battle.” Marcus said drily pointing at his left forearm. “Father was very excited about Demetrius going and making a name for himself. He is my brother in law” he explained. His sister wasn’t allowed to go because even though the Dark Lord accepted women in his lines (even Grindelwald had been hesitant about it) she was pregnant at the moment.

Marcus’ father hadn’t expected his son to go. Marcus wasn’t a particularly good wizard and had to retake his last year in Hogwarts. He was a disappointment that couldn’t aspire to bring any honour to the family. That he didn’t dishonour it further by being a squib was enough nowadays. However Marcus had been perfectly able to cast *petrificus totalus* and take his father’s wand.

“So…” Marcus was ready. He had his wand, his broom, winter clothes and a destination, thanks to his father’s enthusiastic explanation. He hadn’t counted with Sudabar but he guessed she could come. “Shall we go? To Hogwarts?”

Sudabar sneered. “What are we, Gryffindors? No, we are going to get reinforcements. Chop, chop, Flint. I have a list of names and a little bird told me we should get half of them before sunrise.”

***

“Every year…” Percy mumbled “every year… in June. June!”

He didn’t say much more because he had to conserve breath and energy and it had been a while since he last ate so he was at that point when his mind went much faster than his body. If Percy had had the chance to eat a sandwich, things would be much different. He would probably be silent, because these things should be done quietly and speedily. If, for whatever reason, he had eaten a sandwich and also had someone there to help him, then Percy would be speaking in complete sentences and he would be saying something like this:

“Every year, every single year for the last five we were following a schedule: First there was a commotion in Halloween and then a big disaster in June. When was that thing with professor Quirrell? In June. Ginny going missing? In June. Black breaking in the castle and chewing on Ronald? June.” Here there would be a pause to swallow and maybe Percy’s voice would waver. “Him returning? June. Every year. It altered the exams schedule, but at least it was warm and it wasn’t night by teatime.”

To be fair, it wasn’t even that cold. The previous winter had been much colder, but of course Percy wasn’t in any position to stop and remember and in any case he had been working under Scrimgeour at the time so everything had felt chillingly cold back then. That was another thing to comment. Where was Scrimgeour now, eh? Dead! He was dead. He wasn’t here making himself useful. Nobody was.

The deployment would begin soon. Already the first dark creatures were beginning to line by the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest and around Hogsmeade, waiting for someone, a wizard, a human, to give the order. They would attack from the North, taking cover in the forest until they were right before the castle. There would also be a sneak attack from the East, because there was absolutely nothing of interest on that side of the castle and so everyone tended to erase it completely from their minds. Not Voldemort, though. He really knew Hogwarts and its mysteries well.

It was so dark! The stars barely gave any light, hanging there in the sky like stupid cold witnesses. It
was going to be such a long night and it would be so dark! Even when the fires broke they would only make the night darker.

Percy knew that if he failed, if he failed… even if Voldemort died but the others died too, he just wouldn’t be able to read and laugh ever again.

For now he did whatever he could, crouching on the floor and cursing the stupid night that was so cold and came too early. He wasn’t cold because he had put on a couple of good heating charms, but he had had to do it in the first place which was annoying. Also it was dark and he didn’t dare use *lumos* as he carefully laid the cats’ hair on the platform’s floor. Actual cats’ hair, not a fancy name for a potion’s ingredient that turned out to be a funny plant or something. Cats’ hair. Mostly white, a few orange, all laid on the wooden platform and fixed there with a charm. He was putting them in a careful crisscrossing pattern.

Why? Well, because Percy here actually cared about his studies, not that anyone else did and that included the teachers and of course Albus Bloody Dumbledore who, in retrospect, seemed like he wanted them to lose given the kind of DADA teachers he hired.

Quirrel and Lockhart for Merlin’s sake.

Percy blew on his hands to warm his fingers and went back to gluing the cat’s hair.

“Somewhere warm… when I finish, I am going somewhere warm.”

***

The children had an early dinner and then they lined on the gate waiting for the signal to leave. The twins patrolled around them until the last minute, making sure that no one sneaked back.

“Remus” they said simultaneously. Their voices deep, as if weighted with emotion. “Thanks for everything, you know…” Fred waved his hand “everything.”

The laughs, the teachings, the encouragement. Even taking care of Harry because Harry was their sponsor and therefore their favourite person.

“Um, we also got you this” added George. “Had forgotten about it until we saw Parkinson going crazy over Lavender Brown. Draco’s Calling Wands. We have put Sirius, Snape and myself. If, if something goes bad as you take the children.”

Remus took the proffered wand. Shorter than any other wand and painted purple and green so there would be no mistaking it.

“A good invention” said Remus because at this point it was better to speak about concrete things rather than goodbyes and we-might-not-see-each-others-again.

“Yeah, well, we don’t know if it goes through the charms of Hogwarts” Fred admitted.

“They seem to dampen the effect” explained George. “Stupid oversight, eh.”

“No.” Remus said firmly. “It is a good invention.”

Both twins blushed slightly.

“Anyway, better shake hands now. You know, everything we should say now… you know it, right?” said George as he clasped Remus’ hand tightly.
“All the… thanks” added Fred as he took his turn. “So better go now, I see the little Franky hiding in the bushes over there.”

The twins left hurriedly to send little Franky back to the line, even if he was plain visible and it hardly looked urgent. Remus put the wand in his pocket. Sirius had insisted that he wore his long coat and look decently cool during his mission.

And then Severus came to open the doors for them. They would walk to Hogsmeade and take a detour before reaching it and go request Mircilius’ help once again. In a few hours they would find themselves miles away from the conflict.

“Come on now, all of you” yelled Fred “out, out, out.”

Remus stayed behind as the children started to cross the gate.

“I will be very upset if you die.” He informed Severus now that he felt like he could speak without embarrassing himself.

“I know. I can die with that.” Severus said softly.

“I wont’ forgive you.”

“No.”

They hugged and said everything else in that hug and the kiss that followed. How Remus forgave him this act of selfishness, how he would make sure to find Harry and keep protecting him, how Severus, in turn, promised not to die unless it was unavoidable.

It was not a pretty moment, but they had gotten the chance to say goodbye and that was good.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Canon is ambiguous on Wizarding Ireland. They have their own Quidditch team but there is no mention of their government (not that many countries are mentioned). Also, Irish children study in Hogwarts. In this story I imagine that the influence of the British Ministry on Ireland was very strong pre-Voldemort. Voldemort just steps in and tries to conquer them. If there is pureblood problems in Ireland, their dislike of the British is stronger.

Gibraltar is a fiscal paradise and a smuggling port. It is in Spain but belongs to England although they have special legislation.
The Night

Chapter Summary

Do you know how in superhero/spy movies they rarely show any blood and all the fights are so clean? This won’t be like that.
Also, for clarification, whereas the US considers the first floor the one on street level, UK calls the first floor the one above. Where I can, I am using British conventions. So the Great Hall and the lobby in Hogwarts are on the ground floor.

People often think that because Gryffindors are brave they expect everyone else to be brave too and follow them into battle. However, this is a big inaccuracy. Gryffindors don’t like to fight and they particularly don’t like anyone else fighting and getting in danger’s way, are you crazy? Step back immediately! Go inside and lock the door. Gryffindors will face any kind of monster just so the people standing behind won’t have to. They will save your life and then yell at you when you try to repay the favour in kind.

This is to explain how, as six Gryffindors made their way to the Puddlemere field to borrow the professional broomsticks stored there, they were arguing all the way about how everyone else didn’t need to go. So far only Oliver, Angelina and Alicia, were winning on account on them having wands when the others did not.

“I have a hammer.” Tried Lee Jordan.

“You have a cooking mallet and the head comes off when shaken, Lee.”

“And you almost had your hand ripped out.” Added Katie.

“Says the girl with the chest torn by a harpy.”

“It was a curse, idiot, and it’s closed.”

“Shut it, you.” Ordered Oliver with his best commanding voice. “You are only coming as lookouts while we get the brooms. You are not coming.”

“Of course we are! We are not letting you go alone.” Katie turned around so fast that her ponytail moved like a whip.

“I said no.”

“You are not the captain anymore, Oli.”

“I have a hammer!”

“For the last time, Lee” Angelina started to say. She was tired and fed up with Lee Jordan, but she was also very worried about him. He had been so pale and so weak when he collapsed on their door. Angelina had spent the night crying while they waited to see if he would survive until the morning.

“No, really. I have a hammer. Look. It’s all shiny and pretty.” He lifted a hand holding a shiny new hammer that still had the price tag hanging. “I like the handle. It has a nice grip that doesn’t slide.”
“Yo, I got the brooms” said Elizabeth who had known Oliver before he became captain and therefore felt that she didn’t have to listen to him so much or wait for him to say when to go. “And there is also Keeper’ gear. I am thinking we could get the helmets and armguards. I’m taking this bat.”

“Take the balls, too” called Katie before anyone tried to keep her away. “We can always throw the quaffles at them. I once got Cassius Worrington right in the face. It was glorious. Snape docked me twenty points the next day, but still worthy.”

***

Percy couldn’t even see if they were going to survive this. But if they did, he was taking a vacation. Somewhere warm and quiet where he could lay down all day and read. He wasn’t even sure that he would return. Maybe he would stay there, open a bar.

That was such a nice picture. Much nicer than what he had before him. The dark, dark, night and the cold and all the monsters gathering before Hogwarts.

Not that he was there to see any of it. It was an echo. He was still getting visions in small quick flashes and he thought that these were almost in real time. The wizards locking down Hogsmeade (that was about now) Hogwarts in flames (that was in four hours and not supposed to happen) the grounds around the castle drenched in blood (uuh, yes, would happen, in two hours probably) a giant with pointy teeth and a necklace made of bones (now) looking at Hogwarts with lust and gluttony.

And while Percy saw all that he rung the doorbell to Walden MacNair’s mansion. He would open the door himself because he had killed the last house-elf and hadn’t gotten around to replacing it. He would come with his wand but he had spent the evening drinking firewhisky and entertaining two ladies, so he wouldn’t have the best accuracy.

The door opened, Percy threw a punch and immediately retreated back to the street, not checking to see if he had landed it because the burn in his fist told him that he did.

A punch wasn’t much, but he had discovered with surprise that yoga had actually toned his muscles a little bit. In six hours MacNair would have an oedema and his eye would be bruised.

***

They were so big… It was to be expected, the word said it, giants! But somehow hearing it and seeing it was much different. You heard “giants” and you knew they were big, huge, but the brain couldn’t really picture how big they would be.

They came armed with clubs and boulders, crude weapons but in their hands they didn’t really need anything particularly technological and refined. One shuddered thinking what they could do with a bow.

It had to be said, Hogwarts wasn’t a beautiful castle. The distribution of the towers was too uneven, the structure asymmetrical, the windows were sprinkled over the walls like an afterthought and in some places there were doors opening to a big fall outside, stairs going nowhere, and in the case of the Divination tower it didn’t look like it had a base at all. It simply emerged from a knot of smaller towers that were probably holding it upright. Hogwarts had nothing of the regal and clean lines of the castles that are usually available to visit, but while it looked like it had been designed by a madman it also seemed very much like a fortress. Well over three hundred windows and a dozen doors and yet all of them seemed inaccessible.
Voldemort must have known this. Most children didn’t really notice how much of a stronghold Hogwarts was, too busy trying to memorize the changing pattern of the moving stairs and corridors or too astounded by the charmed ceiling in the Great Hall. But the child that Voldemort used to be did, of course he did. He had also noticed how this point went unremarked and undetected by everyone else and he fancied himself the only one who understood the castle’s crazy layout.

He was not. Harry had a lot to say about the lines that divided the outside and the inside of the castle; the Marauders had learned about the secret tunnels that extended away like roots, almost as if Hogwarts needed them to grow; the twins had a deep understanding of the conditions that made the stairs go one way and not another. So Voldemort was not the only one but it was true that he was one of a few and that he knew the castle well.

This is why he had sent the giants first. Rough, coarse, he did not expect them to bring him victory but they would open a path through the forest for the other creatures, more intelligent and refined. They would also open the outer shell of the castle for him. A dozen giants, the most they had managed to get in such short notice, should be able to force the castle’s doors open.

They had crossed half the forest now.

One of them, a female (insofar as one could guess their sex), jolted her head back. She had brown hair, very matted, that looked like the ground in a forest, like a carpet of dry grass. She took a hand to her face and when she lowered it she discovered with surprise that there was blood, dark red, darker than a human’s, in her palm. It wasn’t until she blinked that she realized that there was an arrow in her eye.

Nobody had heard the arrow. They didn’t hear the ones that followed it either. It was as if the night took something more than vision, took hearing and the sense of smell too. The arrows kept coming like upturned rain, swift drops that chimed over the giants. The giantess had red streaks covering her face and after a while she tripped and fell. She tried to get up, blinded but still strong, until she dropped definitely and didn’t get back up.

The centaurs didn’t use stones or sticks. They used bows and they were fast and implacable. They couldn’t stop the giants all by themselves, but they made sure to difficult their advancement and they kept hounding them. Twelve giants had first crossed the charms on the other side of the forest, right though the spot Romasanta showed them (although any other would have worked), only eight made it all the way to the open grounds before the castle and of those two of them were blind and had to rely on the instructions of their comrades.

“All entrances are blocked and protected, prof” said Ron Weasley. He did not allow himself the familiarity of his older brothers but he also wasn’t using “sir” anymore. A respectful “professor” it was for everyone, shorted to “prof” depending on the mood.

“All, Mr. Weasley?”

“Ronald. You know, I have been keeping you secret for years now.”

“Mister Weasley” repeated Severus pronouncing every letter and a few others that usually weren’t there. It put a smile in Ron’s face. “Do you think the doors will be able to withstand the assault all night?”

Ron hesitated. He might keep many secrets but Ron wasn’t a liar. The doors had been imbued with strengthening charms and barrier spells, but even those might break given time and adequate force.

“Well… Eventually…”
“Then choose one, I will defer to yours and Professor McGonagall’s good judgement. Weaken the protections in there.”

“Oh! I see! If they see that a door is about to give up, they will cluster around it. We might get a few good hits from above if we have them…”

“I was thinking for when inevitably one of them cracks. We might as well pick the lesser evil and select which door is less inconvenient for us to succumb.”

“Yes… We could have people waiting right on the other side. If we let one in and we kill them right away, it will be as good as blocking the door again. Maybe the main gate then…”

“Tell McGonagall, she will handle it. And then, Mister Weasley, I think you should go to bed. You too, Miss Lovegood.”

Luna did not look like she wanted to go to bed but since it had been her idea she didn’t fight it. She had said, with that cutting clarity of hers, that by the time they figured out how to lift the charm blocking humans and they got the deatheaters inside they were going to be exhausted from fighting all the non-human creatures and they wouldn’t be able to put much of a fight. Hence, they had organized sleep shifts of two and half hours and since they were thinking about it, she had the house-elves put water bottles in nooks and crannies around the castle together with the occasional non perishable snack. Falling asleep was going to be a hard endeavour because a dozen giants coming to your doors did not in any way facilitate a deep and restful slumber. But Severus had been talking with professor Slughorn saying things like “17% dilution” as if he were wishing him the death of all his relatives so they could expect some potion help without later being too foggy for combat.

***

Percy had a watch. After going to get the hammer and discovering that it was actually three hours later than what he thought he had found some time to quickly pop back to his apartment and get a watch.

It was tradition to present every wizard on his seventeenth birthday with a watch. As it often happened in his family Percy’s birthday had been lost between other events. First it was the Quidditch Championship (Quidditch World Cup, but Percy didn’t pay much attention to that kind of details) and then there was the Triwizard Tournament and he had just started his promising career in the Ministry. Not even him had paid attention to the date.

But that night Bill came to him and gave him a small package because Bill had details like those. It was a watch, not very expensive but more than what their parents could probably afford. Percy deduced that Charlie had also helped to buy it and maybe even picked the model. The sphere was green and the band fake dragonskin (which could be either Bill’s or Charlie’s choice).

It wasn’t very pretty and Percy didn’t want to wear it because it clashed with his formal robes. After the Quidditch Cup he went and bought himself a different one, black and narrow and very discreet, and left the other one in a drawer.

But now, when he needed a watch, this was the one he picked and put on his wrist. It was just a bit after ten and in here it was dark and it was cold. When the clock hands were in a mirror position it would be a bit more hot and there would be some lights around that made the darkness all the more dark.

***
Firebirds were breathtakingly beautiful birds. They were also very much like a deranged hippogriff on fire, meaning that they were aggressive, vicious and on fire. Looking them in the eyes unfailingly brought to mind that quote about staring into the abyss followed by the wish that there were some abyss to stare at because surely the mother of darkness would be soothing compared to the firebirds’ gaze.

Bringing them from Gibraltar to Plymouth and from there to Hogsmeade had been a miserable task that left eight people injured with burns of varied severity plus a wizard who had lost a finger from the left hand. The birds had not enjoyed the trip and they were now brimming for a fight.

“We would prefer for them to cause structural damage” said Selwyn who had been honoured with overseeing the deployment of forces against Hogwarts for the first few hours. “But if they can also target specific people that would be splendid.”

“Sure thing, pisha” said the Gibraltarian tasked with bringing the flock. He had hoped to be done once he arrived in Plymouth, kept waving a piece of parchment to be signed so he could leave, but instead he had been forced to go further north with an increasingly irritated flock. He was not prepared for this. He was certainly not dressed for this. England was cold and all the wrong kinds of wet and he had come wearing shorts and flipflops because he could actually see the coast of Africa from his bedroom window and no one had told him he would now had to stand in a muddy cold field in the outskirts of a British town. The birds shared his frustration which they demonstrated by picking at the bars of their cages and attempting to gouge anyone who came close to them. “They can also sing you a Camarón song and fix the radio while we are at it.”

“I am to infer from your words that it won’t be possible?” Selwyn asked marking his vowels to impress the point that he was much better bred than the sorry wizard before him.

“Just point them in the direction you want to fuck up” said the wizard who could not care less about accents and stress and what to do with your Hs. “When you are done, call them back with the flute” he offered said flute so quickly that Selwyn took it instinctively even though he hadn’t intended to. “Good luck.”

The birds screeched, something like a mix between an eagle and a derailed train. The wizards cleared the zone and standing from the border they vanished the cages holding them. The Gibraltarian trainer had conceded to staying a bit longer and throwing some treats in the direction of the castle so the birds would go that way. Afterwards, he was going. Promise.

As soon as the cages were gone the firebirds opened their wings, long, sharp, golden in colour but somehow less reminiscent of gold and more of something hard and sharp. They had wings that looked like knives and yet, impossibly, managed to lift them in the air. They were above them in seconds, screeching and letting the occasional flame. As they were going up one of them teared a bit of the fence behind the train station and threw it against the wizards that had just freed them. They were quite intelligent, these animals, and quite vicious.

***

“Moody! How could you? That poor innocent bird!”

“Don’t give me any of that Tonks, that poor innocent bird just took Zonkos’ chimney with it.”

“But only after you startled it.”

It was true, Moody had sent a stream of iced water to the firebird’s claws, which made it take flight again, taking the mentioned chimney and breaking a piece of a neighbouring roof with its wing. The
The Order of the Phoenix was free to walk from the outskirts of Hogsmeade where they had appared, through the darkened streets and to the backdoor of The Hog’s Head.

Alberfoth grunted a greeting as they came in. A bit before eight that evening Selwyn had arrived, cloaked and masked and very much like the definition of a deatheater although he had had to remove the mask so they could hear him clearly. He had been accompanied by some low level acolytes and together they informed the Hogsmeade population that the village was closed and that they had to remain indoors and provide help when required. They had *crucio* the first person to make a noise to drive the point that they were serious.

Then they had taken over the train station, posting guards and checking the fenced field behind it, and they made Madam Rosmerta open *The Three Broomsticks* for them. Before anyone arrived it already had looked like they were waiting for someone, a big number of someones. They had also casted a calling spell to warn them if anyone apparated in the village.

Alberfoth had seen all this and he hadn’t waited to see the giants’ arrival before sending a *patronus* with a message for the Order. He sent it to Kingsley because Kingsley was a natural leader and also to Moody because he was a professional survivor and even if every other member had been murdered during the last year (he didn’t know, it might had happened) Moody’s survival was a guarantee. He told them that the village was guarded and alarmed and that they would have to apparate outside of it. Then Alberfoth took the bucket with the grain soaked in wine and spread it all over the east side of the village.

The Order apparated in the yard of the Shrieking Shack. They had gone to shut it down the year when they thought Black and Lupin would try something in Hogwarts, so they were familiar with the place. It was a bit elevated, not enough to give them a good view of Hogsmeade, but they could see the rooftop of the train station just on the other side of the village. They could see the glint of different spells and the *movement*. Not the people there, not the creatures recently arrived, but they could see the movement, the turmoil that originated in the station and spread around it as the deatheaters organized the forces to their satisfaction.

The village itself was very dark and very silent.

“*We must expect an ambush*” said Moody. “*They will be waiting for people trying to get in or out. Remember, our priority is getting to Hogwarts. If someone falls, we go on.*”

“*Such brotherly sentiment*” muttered Mundungus Fletcher. Next to him Arthur and Molly Weasley were holding hands. They had two children in Hogwarts. Two children and an army standing between them.

“*If something happens to him*” said one of the Elderberries cousins, the scary one, pointing to the other, the nice one, “*and you don’t stop and help I will make you regret every day you have lived.*”

“*That won’t be thethary, I am thure.***” Said the nice Elderberry, the one with the lisp and who didn’t look like he ate snake heads for breakfast.

Emmelina Vance said something nice before things got heated and they started to descend the small hill keeping away from the main path. Any other night they might had been visible, a dozen adults walking in line, but there was no moon and so they were able to blend with the night.
Soon almost everyone in the village would have their night vision ruined in any case. There was shriek (“sounds like grandma!” Tonks said) and a flock of firebirds shoot into the sky. The Order stopped in their tracks, looking at them without breath and with their hearts in their mouths. They were painfully pretty, those birds, cruelly beautiful and heading to Hogwarts where their talons and their wings and their fire would be as dangerous as the most nimble wizard.

But they didn’t go to Hogwarts. One of them shrieked again, clucked, and descended to the village square where it began to pick at the floor, scratching with its claw and making deep grooves. The other birds followed, landing all through the street.

There was absolutely no one looking their way while the Order sneaked in the village. They went through the dark streets without problem and when they had to cross a wider one where they could be spotted, one simple charm to make one of the birds move was enough to have everyone looking at the sky and not at them.

“They can’t get inside Hogwarts” Alberforth told them, his voice a mixture of mirth and disdain. “Snape and the Carrows laid a spell to deter humans and now their deatheaters friends can’t go there to help.”

***

The clock said that it was eleven, ha, the eleven hour, but his mind told him that it was the time of bronze and gold and somehow this made sense. Then there would be the time of white, of silver and grey.

Percy was tired and everything was becoming a big blur. He knew what to do and what to do afterwards. But it was so much. So many variables so many things.

He was pretty sure now that McGonagall would survive everything. He didn’t feel like that was doing much because McGonagall was the picture of health and stubborn clinging to life. At the moment he was more worried by Flitwick but he thought he had fixed that.

Two centaurs were going to die or had died already. He was really sorry about that. Centaurs didn’t show well in his visions.

The children were going to be fine, though. Thanks Merlin and Morgana and all those dead people who probably didn’t really do anything to affect current events, thanks to all of them that someone had thought to send Remus John Lupin with the kids. He, like Kingsley Shacklebolt, was a sensible and calm man and he would be enough to protect the odd hundred of children going with him.

***

“The spirits have come to talk to me. Their message carried such force that it shook my rooms!”

“It was a boulder, Sybil” McGonagall explained. “From the giants laying siege to the castle, I don’t know if you were aware?”

“I… Of course, but, the shock… I had a vision of a monster with red eyes and three rings of gold.”

“That would be Harpo-Three-Rings” noted Flitwick from his position by the windows. Even though the giants by the main gate were suffering less harassment (for now), a few of them insisted on attempting to break down the doors on the east side despite the rain of curses pouring over them. They were seeing little progress for now, all the doors were holding and two more giants had succumbed either to the centaurs or to the spells from the castle’s defendants. Making a giant fall was a hard task but they were happy to say that at the moment they thought it feasible.
There was a shriek followed by a woosh, like cold water poured over a hot saucepan. Then there were screams, loud and scared and surprised, coming from the other side of the corridor. Flitwick waved at McGonagall to go and he went back to looking down, sending something purple and sharp in the direction of a giant with only one ear. Gumpo, was how Flitwick was calling him, and he hoped to give some symmetry to his face.

The smell of burned hair and flesh hit Minerva as she got closer. Behind her she could hear Trelawney retching. It was not a pleasant smell but she couldn’t spare much time in that sensation when there were three people on the floor and a big puddle of blood.

“Glacio” one of them was saying, “oh, god, oh, god.”

Cho Chang was kneeling in the floor and her legs and her left hand were covered in blood. She was attending Julius Thompson who was seriously burned. Julius Thompson was another Ravenclaw, did well in Transfigurations, replacement Chaser for the Quidditch team. The information came instantly to Minerva’s mind, trivia about a boy who had been her student until last year. Now he was considered an adult, old enough to stay and fight in the first shift and get horribly burned.

“It’s going to be all right” murmured Richard Brent. Muggleborn, Gryffindor, left Hogwarts fifteen years ago. Not a good Quidditch player or a Transfigurations student, but he had beautiful penmanship that was a pleasure to read. Took Care of Magical Creatures to the NEWT level. “Julius, it’s going to be all right, you will see. I’m all right too.”

He was missing his left arm. Minerva’s eyes didn’t deceive her, it was not a trick of the light, he was missing his left arm. Richard lifted his eyes and looked at her, a clear and clean gaze of off-green eyes. Nothing like Evan’s green, Potter’s green, his eyes were lighter and water-like and in this moment absolutely serene and absent.

“Professor” he said. “It’s all right, it doesn’t even hurt. The fire closed the wound so I am not bleeding. Fire is useful for that.”

“Oh, Mister Brent.” She closed the distance in two strides and grabbed him in a half-hug. She still had time to glance at the open window, but it was all dark, as if nothing had come from there. “I will take you to the infirmary. Sybil, are you there? Then take Thompson. Chang, if you aren’t hurt, see if you can close and bar the window, no don’t worry about the giants below, just shut it close. Come on.”

She could feel the feverish heat of Brent’s flesh even through both of their clothes. He was in shock and Minerva thought she might be going into one too. Pomfrey would know. Pomfrey and her assistants and thank all the gods that it wasn’t just her, that she had spent weeks training new people, that she wasn’t too proud to admit that she wasn’t enough to attend to everyone.

“Susanna” said Richard Brent as if every syllable hurt. “She is a… halfblood. Brown hair, brown eyes, best sm… smile in the world.”

It wasn’t long now, but it felt too long in this bloody castle with its thousand corridors. One infirmary wasn’t enough.

“She is w-working with Madam…Madam… Pom… frey. Do you think, professor, do you think you could leave me with her? Won’t get a better chance to talk to her.”

Minerva wanted to cry. James Potter had once said something similar after he got in a fight. Some older boys throwing around the word “mudblood”. He sat in her office and accepted the lost points and merely asked through his bleeding nose whether she thought that Evans had seen him.
“You will have to be a good patient.” She told Brent. “Do everything she says.”

“Good advice. Good advice.”

***

“Three firebirds isn’t a flock” Severus said. True, but three firebirds had been enough to make a lot of damage and distract them from their attack to the giants. She had been keeping the spell for later but in the end Minerva had had to animate the armours and the statues. They couldn’t harm the giants too much, but they could throw stuff at them without fearing losing a limb to the birds. The firebirds could cut through stone, of course, but not as easily as through flesh.

Madam Pomfrey said that Richard Brent would be all right. He wouldn’t necessarily get his arm back, but he would live and he hadn’t passed out with pain, so that was a positive diagnosis.

Minerva had known the fight would be hard and long, she had known people would get hurt. She had known and still she was surprised and upset when it happened.

“Get some rest, Minerva” Severus told her. “You have done well. The armours will be enough for now.”

“I can’t.”

“I know. But if you don’t, when it is the children’s turn again there won’t be any way to make them go. They won’t be alone. Sirius and Sinistra will be leading them. He is smart and she is no-nonsense.”

All of this made perfect sense except for how Severus wanted her to rest and let kids five times younger fight in her place.

“You too.” Her temples were pulsing with a headache, but she had lived with it ever since the first Potter came to Hogwarts. “Severus, you too. You can’t be making decisions with no sleep.”

“If that’s what it takes for you to rest.”

They were using the library for that purpose. The Great Hall was bigger and had been used in the past for a similar end, but it was too close to the main entrance, any of the entrances really. The library was reasonably quiet even with the giants throwing boulders at the walls and in there, in between the study tables, they could get a bit of rest. Minerva still hated herself for going but she also admitted it had been a good idea when she saw the sixth and seventh years leaving. They looked… well, it wasn’t what they looked like, but how they didn’t look. They didn’t have that pinched expression of exhaustion, that tiredness attached to the blood and the bone. They may not have slept at all, but they had been out of the fight so now they looked calm and in control. They were untouched by fear.

“We can always open a door and fight the giants comfortably from the inside” said Sirius as they gave him the status report. “There won’t be more than two at a time.”

***

“Any progress?” asked Selwyn to his subordinate, a hideously ugly mountain witch that made him a bit nervous. Her work was good, you couldn’t deny her that, but there was something just wrong about wizards and witches that didn’t attend Hogwarts. They all received the letter, of course, and they all rejected the invitation and chose to stay at home and learn from their elders. Bunch of incestuous weirdos, if you asked Selwyn.
“The birds that arrived there are doing some damage” she told him. Three birds, just three firebirds out of twenty. The others were still playing around Hogsmeade and that idiot trainer refused to do anything about it, said he only had to deliver them and that’s what he did and that Gibraltar was partly independent anyway so he didn’t have to listen to Selwyn. Once Selwyn crucio him, he showed a better disposition to cooperate, but the truth remained that he had seventeen upset firebirds to corral before sending them to Hogwarts. This is what happened when you worked with people with the wrong blood.

“Yes. And the giants?”

“Well, they seem to be working over two spots.”

“And that’s it?”

“What else do you want? I can’t use my mirror to see, the place is warded. All we have if one of your men with a pair or glass-eyes, be they cursed three times.”

She spit three times quickly. Selwyn had to remind himself that this woman, Gillray, knew her way around curses and wild creatures so she had some use even if she was afraid of binoculars.

Binoculars.

If the giants still hadn’t managed to tear down the doors, they wouldn’t do it any time soon without the firebirds’ support. Officially, this shouldn’t matter. Selwyn’s orders had been clear and simple: 1) Keep them engaged and exhaust them 2) Break down the curse keeping humans away. That was it. So far, he was following the plan well regarding the first point. Once they had been fighting for at least five hours they could start with point number two knowing that they wouldn’t react in time to stop them.

It was just… Well, Selwyn had received a great honour directing the first hours of the attack. He had been surprised. He knew none of the Lestranges would get it because they were not in any state to direct anything other than themselves, but he had thought that Malfoy would be the one. Instead, the command had been given to him and Selwyn wouldn’t be a Slytherin if he didn’t wish to have everything wrapped up by sunrise. Follow the Dark Lord’s orders and go beyond them and excel so that by the time everyone else arrived Selwyn could lay a hundred captured wands before Voldemort’s feet.

He was not going to get a quick victory with a bunch of dumb giants and three deranged birds. It was time to increase the heat and lay it hard on the people at Hogwarts.

Figure of speech, of course, heat was the last thing they were going to feel.

***

“I am pretty sure the spells fall over the secret corridors. We won’t be able to cross.”

“Not this one.” Alberfoth grunted. “It exists only when it is needed.”

The Hog’s Head was full of tension. It was no secret that Alberfoth didn’t like any of them, probably because they were affiliated to his brother and he didn’t like Albus at all. Beyond that, many of them worked for the Ministry and The Hog’s Head saw many activities that were frowned upon or downright illegal.

Perhaps, just perhaps, it also had to do with the fact that Alberfoth held a profound dislike of Alastor “Madeye” Moody. The dislike was returned with equal intensity to everyone’s bewilderment because from a distance Alberfoth and Moody were quite similar.
“Who is the girl in the picture?” asked Molly trying to lighten the mood. The girl smiled gently at her words before stepping out of the frame.

“My sister.”

“Oh? I didn’t know you had a sister. I don’t think Dumbledore ever mentioned her.”

Alberfoth grunted for all answer. Of course not, of course not. Just as they still called him Dumbledore, not him and certainly not her. No one ever said her name and only her beloved brother remembered her.

“Uuh… it’s getting chilly, isn’t it?” said Emmeline Vance, the sweetest witch of the two wars. Since he was thinking about Ariana, Alberfoth thought that she would have liked Emmeline. She was sweet but also unafraid of using her wand.

It was getting chilly. It was a winter night so the statement wasn’t particularly helpful or clever, but there was a sudden force seeping out the heat of the room almost as if someone had pressed a button.

“Hey” called Tonks in a whisper, she had turned her back to them and had her wand out. Good girl, Tonks. She once took the appearance of Albus and came to the pub and gave detention to all the Hogwarts students hanging there. Alberfoth saw right through it, of course, but he enjoyed the spectacle of the squirming students. “The windows are frosting.”

The windows were frosting at a very fast rate. Kingsley was trying to peer out of them while remaining unseen. Moody simply looked around with his unblinking electric blue eye.

“Dementors.” He told them. “More dementors than I have ever seen.”

Soon even with the frosted windows they could see the dark figures moving through the street outside. It was like seeing a big sea creature swimming under the ice and wondering how thick it was after all, how long would it resist if the marine monster noticed your shadow overhead.

“Oh, dear Merlin, Ginny!” squeaked Molly. She was once again holding Arthur’s hand and she looked about to fall down. The others were too old or too young to have children in Hogwarts, but the Weasley had two of them.

Just then, Ariana opened the door in the wooden wall that would take them to the castle. The presence of the dementors was so upsetting that hardly anyone stopped to think about the deep rarity that the tunnel was. Even in a world of magic, secret tunnels didn’t usually appear on a partition wall.

“Go.” Said Alberfoth. “Everyone has the mugs? Then go.”

They had all walked the path between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade many times. They all knew that it took about an hour. It might take longer in the tunnel. It might not work at all if the warding spells fell over it. Molly Weasley had already darted inside, holding the mug Alberfoth had given her against her bosom and with her wand out. In they went the rest of them, only Kingsley and Moody stayed long enough to thank Alberfoth and ask him to keep them informed of the movement in Hogsmeade.

They ran and ran and ran even though the most realistic and seasoned between them knew that they would never outrun the dementors.

***

Hogwarts wasn’t a beautiful castle. Hogwarts was an architectural aberration. Seen from above or
from the forest it did have a picturesque profile. At night, the outline of the castle, with its unnecessary large number of turrets, its roof full of gables, and easily a thousand windows, was less threatening and more picturesque and oddly charming. It gave the impression of being big and silly and welcoming.

(In the evenings and in the early morning it looked like a prison, Harry had noticed it since the first day. Eight in the morning was not a good hour to look at Hogwarts.)

Right now it looked as if the castle were a rocky island in a grey sea. The giants had retreated for a while, called by the sound of a horn. The three firebirds had also moved away to a clearing somewhere in the Forbidden Forest where someone was playing their song. Some of the roofs were smoking, long tendrils of white and black. It looked as if the castle were a rocky island in a sea at night, it looked as if a wave full of foam were coming to crash over it.

The cloaks of the dementors had a grey shine to them that in a night like this looked like a muted white.

***

The year of Sirius Black, when supposedly he was coming to kill Harry, it had looked like half the dementor body of Azkaban had been taken to guard Hogwarts. But, honestly, that was nothing, nothing. Azkaban must had been left deserted now and some deatheaters had to be going around dreary places where dementors formed to pick them up.

There must be well over a hundred, a hundred and twenty easily. They could feel their cold presence long before they began to see the pointy end of their hoods. They came from the south, from the main gate and the path to Hogsmeade, rather than from the forest. Perhaps they would have gotten tangled there in the branches, although they could float over the treetops so perhaps not. Maybe they had come that way simply because it looked more dramatic, a big compact cloud of sorrow rising over the gate and drifting gently towards the castle.

“This is a good thing” said Luna. Her voice was like the sun on a cloudy day, pale and unseen and covered by the grey clouds, but still powerful enough to reach their eyes with a glare.

Maybe there were even more dementors than what they had guessed at first. They were now spreading slowly to the sides in a line that was approximately the same length of the castle and two storeys tall.

“There are so many of them… Azkaban will be empty.” Luna went on. “Maybe they have left some troll guards, but the people there will feel much better now and they might even manage to escape.”

There was a strong exhalation from Sirius. Twelve years he had spent there. Twelve years and he was now facing his worst torment in a size previously unseen.

“Sweet Merlin, Lovegood.”

Twelve years but also quite a lot of Gryffindor bravery keeping Sirius there rather than stepping back and looking for another place to fight or even locking himself in a closet. No one would judge him or hold it against him, no one, but he had stayed and looked with them at the approaching wall of dementors.

What a horrifically beautiful image they would make. The castle hardly touched, its treasures preserved, and the previous inhabitants wandering aimlessly through the corridors with open hands and lost gazes until Voldemort came to claim the place. Although perhaps he would send the
werewolves first and they would fall over them, too lost and sleepy to fight back, and the picture of silver and grey would be painted in red.

But that was earlier. That had been earlier in Sirius’ mind. Now they had Luna’s words reminding them that they were not fighting for themselves but for the people outside. For Harry and his chances of living a life away from all this darkness, for all the people lost and captured who would be hurt instead, for Remus and the children that needed time to get away. They weren’t fighting to save themselves, but to take a bad thing down. This was a very important difference.

There was something almost cruel in Luna’s optimism. She would not feel sad, she would not, no matter the price. She would not feel sad even when she should. She would not feel sad to the point that she would die if that would make for a generally better outcome.

“Then we better make sure that they don’t return there th” called Ron. “I want two wizards per window all around the third floor. Check the back too, they may be a distraction for something worse sneaking that way. And three wizards on the towers: Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Astronomy and Aviary. Come on.”

They jumped to action. Ron preferred to place them in layers so there would be no empty areas in the defence. If anyone fell there would always be someone to take their place. With this distribution, however, they were spread thin all over the perimeter. But there weren’t many other options nor time to argue. There was some muttering about why was Ron giving orders which was explained on account of him being the Weasley with the highest number of freckles which made Fred snort a surprised laugh and admit that the argument was fair enough and he would go to a tower now.

The dementors were almost over them. Below, on the ground, the spells were casted less frequently and the arrows of the centaurs were shot with more time between them. Even the giants seemed to be feeling the effect, looking a bit distracted and torpid although it might had been the cold, that damned cold that clung to the dementors’ cloaks. First opportunity he got, Sirius was going to take a break and go put on a thick wool sweater even if the leather jacket was way cooler.

Someone was blowing a horn in the forest and the call was like a dying whale.

The firebirds had gone and they would have never thought that they would miss the light and the heat of those mad monsters. The giants were retreating too and it provoked such hopelessness! Please, don’t. Come back, please, don’t let me die alone. When the dementors came, you always felt so alone.

They were here. They were almost over them, but this, Ron told them, was a good thing because not everyone’s *patronus* could go very far. They were almost over them but that only meant that it would be easier to hit them. They were right there, they could see the pattern in the fabric of their cloaks. The dementors floating on top were almost right at the same level that the students in the third floor. They could see their skeletal hands with fingers that seemed to have too many knuckles, they could see that the hoods had faces underneath that looked like those of mummies.

“*Expecto patronus*” said Ron.

That was all the signal they needed. With a wizard or a witch in every window they could see if the neighbouring one had casted the spell and cast theirs in turn, and at the first flashes of silver the wizards from the towers casted theirs too. It looked like a wave or a waterfall, like a paper fan unfolding.

Ron had gone first because his *patronus* was one of the most reliable. Having seen his it was easier for the others to take a breath and conjure theirs.
It looked like a silver fan, yes, but it felt like a waterfall. It was loud and strong.

It was strong.

It was also understood, thanks to Ron and professor Lupin, that sometimes happiness was painful. Sometimes happiness hurt so much that it made you cry and that only made the patronus all the more powerful, it made them trampling, crushing, flattening.

It was the feeling as the girl you loved like a part of your body told you that she was all right, not dead, and with those words you felt as if you were returned a lung.

It was the feeling as you saw the face of the boy you were in love with. Although you still hadn’t realized it was that kind of love, you just knew that you missed him immensely and that the thought of him passing for a pureblood and being safe in Hogwarts had been like food, giving you the energy to go on.

It was the feeling as you held you idiot friend, future boyfriend and husband, in your arms and you could swear that your heart had stopped working but it didn’t matter because you could feel him there, right there, living and breathing and hugging you back.

It was the feeling when you said “no” to your parents and they kicked you out of the house and the future was uncertain and scary and so liberating that it was intoxicating. When you said “no” to those who would see you submit just because you are a girl.

It was the feeling as your insane mother, who was frail and gentle and had the most delicate wrists, looked at you as if she could recognize you, as if she weren’t insane in that instant, and told you that she was so proud of you and she loved you so much. And then she repeated a funny story that James had told her (James who had been dead for fourteen years) and at first she smiled and then she laughed and this was the first time you remembered hearing her laugh, the first time.

(Neville had cried for hours that night and afterwards he had stopped feeling small and clumsy and fat).

It was the feeling as you heard that the girl you loved wasn’t dead, that girl you loved so much that you would see her with someone else if that made her happy, she wasn’t dead just as your little sister wasn’t dead and hearing the news had been like getting a punch right to the heart.

It was every little victory, every moment of sunshine stolen from the darkness, every laughter and every tear, and they fell with the force of the ocean, roaring, thundering and devastating.

And when the waters receded, when the patronus floated away and vanished, not a single dementor remained, not even their cloaks, not even a little thread.

“Was that a komodo dragon? Who the hell has a patronus that is a komodo dragon?”

“Oh, my god, I saw that someone had an ostrich. I need that person to date me.”

***

The distance between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts took an hour to cross. The Order did it in half that time and they arrived winded, sweaty and covered in mud and dust, with the exception of the Slytherin Elderberry who was impeccable. Some strands of her hair had gotten loose and she was fixing them as if this were the biggest tragedy that could happen tonight.

They emerged from the fifth floor to a castle that wasn’t as noisy as usual during the school year, but
there was noise and movement and an underlying tension meaning that the dementors weren’t there. They took a collective breath. They had arrived in time.

“Oh, dear, how did you come in? No human is supposed to come in. Never mind, stay here, I will warn the Headmaster right away. Hate to cut his rest shift short but he must know about this.”

They barely got any time to see the feathers of Nearly Headless Nick’s hat before he disappeared through a wall.

***

The watch said that it was one in the morning. Technically, they were in the day of the Battle of Hogwarts now. They would mark the date of the day in which Voldemort entered Hogwarts, no the day when the attack itself started.

Percy still had with him a plastic bag with two or three dozens of iron nails. He also had an apple, a bit old and wrinkly, but it may be that it was the first thing he ate since Wednesday (if he had eaten breakfast on Wednesday, he couldn’t remember). It was a very good apple, that was the point.

On the floor the hag stirred and Percy wacked her again on the head. Not the most powerful witch of the country, or even the mountains in which she lived. She was just a hag, nasty and wild, like the one currently helping Selwyn only this one was even less powerful.

But she was lucky even if she didn’t feel so at the moment. She was lucky and she knew how to brew a potion that emitted a debilitating smoke, something that at the first drift would make people drop dead. It was hardly the best weapon to invade a castle. It couldn’t be thrown, just deposited in the floor so no one would go through there.

It was actually quite stupid and Percy had had it up to here with stupid people. As soon as the potion was discovered someone with good aim would vanish the whole thing from a safe distance.

But it would be discovered by Luna Lovegood, or rather when someone saw her dead body lying on the floor, the hag trying to drag it without getting too close to the fumes. She wanted to eat her spleen and make a necklace with the bones of her fingers.

Percy’s visions were so good that he got to see the damned necklace (worn by someone else, the hag had been killed) in a future in which they all lost and kept losing for many years.

Percy didn’t know Luna very well, or at all, but she had been really good to Ginny after that terrible first year in Hogwarts. Ginny had bought her a funny pair of earrings for Christmas, that’s why Percy remembered her.

He didn’t need to hit the hag on the head a third time but he did it anyway. For the necklace.

***

“Oh, oh, oh!” exclaimed Sirius excitedly as soon as he turned the corner. Remus said that when they were young he had been prone to bouts of deep depression in between the cheer that bordered on mania. James had been the one with a consistently joyful character. But ever since Azkaban Sirius had been steadily cheery and he didn’t dwell for long in glum. Severus found that he was glad. “Can I? Can I? Can I, please? Please, before any of us die, just let me, pleeease.”

“Go ahead” said Severus who had come with him to check on the “most certainly friendly intruders” that Nick had told them about. He still had almost an hour before he was due to get up but he hadn’t
really gotten much sleep, merely a power nap and the opportunity to do a crossword. The time to
distract the mind was good though, it helped to sharpen his senses and get his ideas straight.

Sirius beamed at him.

“He isn’t a servant of Voldemort!!” Sirius said with a big smile pointing at Severus who just stood
there being thin and dressed in black and the epitome of a cartoon villain. “But! Is he loyal to
Dumbledore? No! In-de-pen-dent par-ty. Because old Dumbles made some very questionable
choices including letting me rot in Azkaban for twelve years. And, here comes the best, I am not
done yet, Moody, listen you mad fart, listen.”

“Is this all nec-?” Alastor Moody started to say. Kingsley put a hand on his arm and shook his head.
He had experience with Black and his friends, it was too late to try to curtail him.

“My fried Snappy here is the one who got Harry from that abusive hole where he was living, not
Remus. Boom!”

Every single member of the Order of the Phoenix turned to stare at Snape. It was hard to say whether
they were more shocked by this piece of information or by Sirius referring to him as a friend.

“If you are quite finished” Severus said in a mellow tone. “I do have a battle to win, yes miss
Tonks?”

Tonks had raised her hand much to Moody’s annoyance. She had a cute pixie cut and deep pink
hair. Not what is usually referred as bubblegum pink, not that soft pale tone, but rather bubblegum
wrapping. It was loud and harsh and quite a sigh after the dementors attack.

“Are you also Galahad?” the girl asked.

“No.”

“Is it Sirius?”

“There is no one in this castle going by that name, now if you would be so kind as to help us with
the forces intent on massacring us.”

“Oh, boy, I am the best informed wizard in all of England” Sirius said to himself while they showed
the newly arrived reinforcements how they were organized.

***

“Oh! More adults. Whatever we would do without them?”

It was agreed in the Slytherin common room that Theodore Nott Junior was a treasure to be
cherished and esteemed.

With his usual lack of tact Mundugus Fletcher was about to remind everyone that Theo’s father was
most likely outside waiting to fight them and kill them all. A death eater’s son shouldn’t exhibit such
sarcasm. However the Scary Elderberry kicked him in the ankle before he got more than two words
out. She had come wearing a pair of expensive heels, a mixture of black and green that sparkled in
the light. As a concession to the situation she had foregone her usual pencil skirt for a pair of black
trouser that emphasised the length of her legs.

“Did anyone call the Weasley kids?” said Severus while he overlooked the latest report from the
infirmary. Sirius had left the professors’ common room to go check things in the front line.
(It boiled down to a few injured, none fatal, and a pray of thanks that they had thought of brewing potions before hand and training people. Pomfrey refused to set a second camp like McGonagall had requested because of reasons that sounded sensible enough that Severus felt comfortable skipping over them. She said she was using the house-elves to apparate the injured to her and while this jolted them and a few had fainted it guaranteed that they got treatment quicker.)

“Theo, quit the sass and go call Weasley.” Snape ordered. “Take his place. Patil, no, the other one, we have got a bit of a breathing room now, but the ghosts tell me the giants are coming back soon, go and see about mending some of the stone damage. Professor Flitwick will be there soon if you need help. Why are you all carrying mugs?”

It took them a while to realize he was now talking to them. Severus Snape was a man known by the care with which he enunciated his words and he had spoken as fast as Sirius Black.

Kingsley was the first to recuperate because he was a man who had had his Prefect tenure with the Marauders. If that wasn’t training for his later career as an Auror, nothing would be. He had excellent reflexes.

“Wheat and wine” he said, lifting the mug. “For the firebirds.”

“Wonderful” Severus said with the same intonation with which he might say fish-sticks. “Take care of that then.”

He put the papers down and picked others, these ones were pink and had daisies drawn on the corner which meant (although of course they had no way to know) that it was Lovegood telling him about the newly re-arranged rest schedule updated to account for the injured.

“Oh, and Mrs and Mr Weasley might want to stay. I am sure they will like to see their children.”

***

The inept Gibraltarian had finally gotten the birds back and this time they had chained them and dragged them through the muddy path all the way to the gates of Hogwarts where they would be released. The giants were back at it and it seemed like they were making some progress with the main door so if things kept going like now in an hour Selwyn could have two packs of werewolves inside the castle. He had been promised vampires too but they were still in the train or so Gillray told him. Not too bad. He might still get his victory before sunrise, even if he had inexplicably lost the dementors.

He had to get the wards down at the very least or Voldemort would punish him hard for such a loss. Two hundred dementors gone. How could he have expected that?

The birds were bristling and lashing at each other. He had had to open his coat because the heat near them was unbearable. The Gibraltarian (he had a name that Selwyn did not care to memorize) grunted with effort. He had finally stopped with the sass or speaking altogether. He was sweating and bleeding from various cuts from the birds’ wings.

“Go.”

The Gibraltarian vanished the chains and the birds immediately took to flight. They rose over the trees and the gate and went naturally towards Hogwarts. That’s where all the lights and the sounds were.

***
“Oh, Ginny! Ginny!”

“MUM!”

“Oh, my dear, oh dearest, Ginny, Ginny, my little girl.”

The rest of Mrs. Weasley’s word were lost on Ginny’s hair and she held her daughter close. Her girl, her sweet little girl. She had had to go before Ginny returned from Hogwarts and there was not a day in which she didn’t wished she had stayed for her. They had gotten word that Bill had taken them for the summer, but Bill was Bill, and although Molly had no doubts that he would protect them, he still kept his long hair and an earring and he just wasn’t good enough to care for them, not like she would. That French girl would be no good either, she might try to feed them snails.

But it didn’t matter. Ginny was here, she was fine. She had been in Hogwarts under Snape and she was fine.

“Oh, Ginny. I love you so much, my dear.”

“Ah, well, good to know who is the favourite child of the family, don’t you think Fred?”

“Right you are, George. Always thought it was Bill.”

Mrs. Weasley emitted a short shriek and she ran to hug her twin sons. She did not release Ginny first and so she knocked their heads together. There were some ouches and more unintelligible screaming and then Arthur Weasley was before his sons with his eyes full of tears which was something incredibly uncomfortable to witness. Molly was supposed to be the emotional one. Arthur was agreeable and absent minded and it was just wrong to see him crying.

Ron stayed behind waiting patiently because he might not know who was the favourite child, if there was any, but he knew who was the forgotten one. It was all right. It might had hurt earlier in life but now he was too busy to be upset about it. He had just successfully led his fist charge into battle and he still had a bit under one hour to work, no matter what Snape were doing now up. He had plans for the giants and was already thinking three or four moves ahead. If his parents were hugging his other brothers first, it really didn’t matter.

Arthur Weasley lifted his head from Fred’s shoulder and he blinked at Ron. It took him two seconds to recognise his youngest son who was now taller than the twins and, more than that, looked older, looked like a man. Ron’s blue gaze was calm and mature and he was looking at Arthur not like a son looks at his father but like an equal. One of the main officers in the battle of Hogwarts.

But he was still a seventeen year old boy (around three months until he was eighteen) so when his father came to him with his lips trembling Ron took his hug and he loved it.

***

The wine-soaked grain had been dumped and spread over the ground of one of the inner cloisters. The Weasleys had given theirs to others because they were not done hugging their children. For some reason a Slytherin girl, one that might had been active during the riots, they weren’t sure, was now there and looking at the Scary Elderberry with cow eyes.

They could see the stars from where they were, and the reflection of spells on the side of one of the towers, the Aviary it looked like. But still it seemed like the place was too enclosed and too deep to be found by the firebirds when they had a whole castle full of people sticking their arms and heads out.
There was twenty birds and they only needed one of them to see the grain. The others would follow even if the first firebird tried to keep it secret. It was their favourite thing in the world.

There was a screech (“I tell you, just like grandma! Oh, the memories”) and then a firebird came flying and took one piece of gutter with its razorsharp wing. There was no need to order them to empty the cloister as the bird descended upon them.

“Well I think they are just beautiful” Tonks informed them, her hair turning up and spiky and going golden. She did not quite get the look, but the colour was pretty good.

More birds followed. Soon all the walls leading down to the cloister were full of deep scratches and missing every ornamental piece. Some of the most intrepid birds were sticking their heads between the columns of the cloister in case there were more wheat or something equally interesting over there.

The Order stayed behind, on the shadows and on the windows facing there, carefully counting the birds. It wasn’t easy. One firebird was identical to another and they kept moving.

Dedalus Diggle stuck his head out from one of the top windows. “No more birds in the sky” he said “It must be all of them.”

Unfortunately this meant that the twenty birds all turned to look at him and their previous behaviour indicated that they would now try to rip Dedalus’ head off. The ones looking through the columns immediately backed up and the others started to open their wings, although there were so many of them that it wasn’t easy for any of them to actually take flight.

This was quite positive. It gave Dedalus’ enough time to also stick out his arm and wand and then everyone casted a protective spell at the same time. A silvery net formed in the air and carefully descended trapping the birds under the first floor. Would it be enough to keep them there? They had no idea. Firebirds weren’t studied in Hogwarts beyond a one-page mention for obvious reasons given that they lived in warmer climates. They might be able to burn so hot that they would melt the stones around them but they still had to try to keep them there.

For now everyone retreated quickly because what everyone knew, through recent observation if not studies, was that humans’ presence irritated them. They even hung black velvet curtains over the windows so they wouldn’t see any lights or movement through them.

There was still some shifting between the birds, a wave of irritation and confusion that is seen in coops everywhere, and then they seemed to settle more or less comfortably and went back to picking at the ground.

It wouldn’t last. I might not last. Any hit from the giants, any curse casted too loud, and they would be back to thrashing and burning and no one was confident that the charm or the walls would hold. Fortunately Hogwarts had someone insane enough to look at a flock of twenty giants birds on fire and think that they probably just needed some treats and being petted behind the ears. Someone who attempted to keep a dragon in a wooden hut, who raised a giant murderous spider, who to this day thought hippogriffs were sweet creatures if one knew how to treat them, and who refused to accept the blast-ended skrewts for the unholy monstrosities that they were.

“No pushing, no pushing” said Hagrid as he stepped into the cloister with a bucket full of freshly prepared grain with wine. “Hey, don’t peck at your brother, you! There is enough for everybody.”

***

Selwyn couldn’t help smiling and leaning back with satisfaction when at last they saw the giants
break the damned door. There. Once a line was broken it remained so and he could see through the magic binoculars that Urduk, the chieftain of the giants, was crossing the threshold and coming into the entrance hall of Hogwarts. Later he would have to be killed for sullying a sacred wizarding place with his presence but for now he was going inside.

And tripping, it seemed, he was tripping, that bloody stupid oaf.

And falling.

And...

He was not getting up. The view was now obscured by two other giants who rested their weapons against the wall and each took a leg to drag Urduk out. There seemed to be some resistance.

“My lord” said Gillray. There was a cloud of an acrid smell around her, like rotten garlic and a dead animal. “My cousins can help you. They are here. They only wait for you to give the order.”

Yes but it filled Selwyn’s mouth with distaste. He didn’t like them. But he didn’t like the giants either and they weren’t going to go much further, plus all the freaking firebirds had disappeared behind a tower and they were supposed to be the most fearsome fire creature short of the dragon.

“They are intelligent, sir. They can follow the most complex orders…”

So they might actually get inside and kill Snape and break the bloody charms keeping them out.

“They are hungry. All they ask is that they be allowed to feed.” Gillray added in a raspy whisper. Then she coughed. “Heart. Liver.”

Selwyn lowered the binoculars and looked at the line of the castle and the trees.

“Very well.”
Chapter Notes

From the Spanish. “Madrugada” is the time between midnight and the sunrise and I love that there is a word for it just as I love that English differentiates between afternoon and evening.

“I don’t know what makes you think that I follow the rules, ever” Severus noted. Minerva had just come from her rest shift, Ron was supposed to go rest now. Both were telling him that he should not have interrupted his sleep and should go now to get some. He refused, claimed he was the Headmaster and later pointed that he didn’t usually do what people wanted to begin with.

“It shouldn’t be a disappointment or a surprise.”

It certainly wasn’t a surprise to Luna, or maybe she was always carrying a midnight snack with her. She produced a thermos with a tisane (caffeine free, so he could sleep later) and a couple of sandwiches. One of the Patil twins had braided her hair and she was wearing something reminiscent of a sweatshirt with a big happy moon painted in front. It was night time so she wore night time clothes, fire and battles nonwithstanding.

“If you need anything” Kingsley ventured and Severus nodded in his direction, offer acknowledged. Kingsley could be trusted to steer the ship for a while. He had naturally come to lead the defunct Order of the Phoenix, rising it from its ashes after Dumbledore’ death. Moody was more experienced and Kingsley didn’t hesitate to acknowledge it, but Moody lacked the organizational spirit that Kingsley always had. Moody was natural loner while Kingsley was like a shepherd’s dog.

Besides, Moody wasn’t a Prefect and he didn’t have to keep Gryffindor tower under control when he was a student. It might sound like a joke but James Potter used to go to the Forbidden Forest for a stroll from week one of his first year and Remus Lupin once stole the grindylow they were supposed to use in DADA class and kept it hidden in his room for two weeks. Apparently he thought that while they ought to study the creature, repeatedly hitting it with spells was akin to torture and after he explained himself to Potter the Elder he agreed, which is why they kept a category C monster under their bed for half a month and Kingsley was the one who had to fix that.

Severus was aware of this.

“Maybe in hour” he told Kingsley.

***

They were female, that much was very obvious, and intelligent insofar as they seemed to have a language. But they were naked just like animals are naked. Even the muggleborns Selwyn kept at home were dressed with rags to preserve decency. Not he harpies, though.

This was also one of those strange cases in which the eye barely rested on the naked figure. Just as people tended to forget that veelas could transform into birdlike creatures that threw balls of fire, when confronted with a harpy most people barely paid attention to their nakedness and instead focused completely on the razor sharp claws they had instead of hands.
Gillray was sniffing the air around the border. She licked a finger and caressed the place where the charms had been casted.

“I smell woman” she said. “She is the one”.

Selwyn didn’t care who exactly had casted the spell, only that it was broken before sunrise. The harpies, however, seemed to consider this an important fact. Gillray walked up and down the treeline, sniffing, licking, and moaning orgasmically.

Coming from her, it did nothing for Selwyn’s libido. In fact, he could feel his testicles retreating. One of his acolytes had come to bring him a message about the status of the station and Selwyn could feel his discomfort even with the mask on.

“Her blood” Gillray said. “Her blood strengthened the spell. I can taste it here.”

Her brothers Amycus is what she meant, not her actual blood used on the spell. After so many weeks working with her Selwyn had gotten used to the hags’ way of speaking. It was barbaric but others like Thorton had to work with creatures that were far worse.

Gillray assured him that the spell could only be lifted through those who casted it, otherwise it would remain unbroken and only time in the shape of centuries could make some damage. Selwyn asked if she meant “by”. She didn’t.

“Spoils, my lord” said the hag “that’s all they ask for. Spoils to sate their needs, just some spoils in exchange for the victory they will bring you.”

He thought about it.

“Anything they want as long as it is night” he conceded “they keep fighting during the day and during daytime they will get the same rewards as anyone else.”

Gillray bowed down. The harpies hissed and opened their wings.

***

“Where the fuck I am?” wondered Percy. Since the last few days had been harrying and his mother wasn’t around he felt free to swear.

He looked up and down the place. Apparition required focusing on the image of the place you wanted to be, which is why it was impossible apparating to unknown places. Unless, of course, you had previously seen them in a vision so you could known them even if you had never been there.

There was cold air that made goosebumps on Percy’s arms.

He turned around. That over there looked familiar. There wasn’t anything like a path, but if he was careful he could trek down and get to a flatter terrain. From there it would be easier, he just had to be careful with that heather bush so he didn’t trip. Then there would be a lot of “excuse me”, “incoming”, “excuse me,” “to your left, thank you” and he would be where he had to be.

***

The main doors of Hogwarts were open. Well, not open exactly because open implies the possibility of being closed and it wouldn’t be possible in this case because the doors had been reduced to a pile of splinters. The body of the giants’ chieftain, however, made for a decent obstacle. A line of five or six wizards could hold the entrance for a long time. So the doors could be said to be open and closed.
at the same time.

However the giants seemed to have lost all interest on that entrance and had gone back to tearing down the door on the east side. They would never be able to get through it, but Voldemort’s observation had been right. It was less defensible, with fewer windows and balconies over it from where they could cast spells. Then there was the reports of werewolves hanging around the forest and attacking the centaurs who had retreated there. The werewolves had precisely the speed and strength required to fight a centaur but they weren’t engaging them much, just a few skirmishes that seemed designed to draw them away from the castle. They might not even be werewolves (too much human in them) and be some kind of ogres instead.

Or so Severus thought, at the moment he didn’t know if he was seeing too much. Maybe the ogre-werewolves had no plan or strategy behind their actions. Maybe Voldemort knew that Severus had come to expect duplicity from everyone and could therefore be defeated with a simple and straightforward plan. That seemed an inordinately amount of awareness on the Dark Lord’s part but perhaps the betrayal had made him cautious.

Mostly all this werewolf talk made him think of Remus. He wouldn’t necessarily have anything to say at the moment, but Severus could do with him telling him something, anything. He really, really, wanted to hear his voice.

“They have brought trolls” Arthur Weasley said. Most of the Order had come to naturally join the current shift, although they were having some trouble following or even listening to Snape’s orders. Severus didn’t take it personally. They had spent months believing him a loyal deatheater and he didn’t have a high opinion of their mental flexibility. If they had never stopped to question Dumbledore’s orders he couldn’t very well expect them to fall in line easily now. They were helping and that’s what mattered. Arthur Weasley, Emmelina Vance and Nymphadora Tonks were showing to be very amenable to the idea of a good Snape which doubtlessly was why Kingsley was sending them his way.

To this moment, Moody was still calling him a murderer under his breath.

“They are trolls?” asked Severus. Trolls were like small ramrods, strong and resilient, but hardly the worst thing that could come to their walls. “How many?”

“About two dozens. Most of them are gathered on the north side, under the Astronomy tower, a few on the west. I am told that they can get some good shots from the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw towers, and from the Transfigurations corridor.” Arthur spoke with a serenity that was the paragon of British composure. It was exactly the kind of poise that people like Vernon Dursley wished they had and very rarely achieved. Severus supposed that someone who had married Molly Prewett and had fathered that horde of children had to be unflappable.

“Kingsley has taken some people and his on the north side” Arthur went on. “Flitwick says he is staying on the east and protecting that entrance even though no giant can fit there. McGonagall is with the others on the west side, they think that casting from the Transfigurations corridor should be enough to stop most of the trolls.”

That, Severus thought, was a perfectly sensible plan.

“I am going to be by the entrance” Arthur said. “They could always use and extra wand there.”

Severus looked at him. His eyes, so dark that passed for black, met the more tranquil blue eyes of Arthur. Everything that had been said was sensible and yet Severus was quivering with tension.
“Call them back” he said, his voice hoarse with fear. “Call them back, call them back.”

“But, why, what.”

“I don’t know, you fool, just call them back.”

***

It was too late.

***

The Transfigurations corridor was full of blood. On the floor and on the walls against which people were leaning. They were taking it well, however, a deep form of courage that had them taking deep breaths as they checked over their injuries and saw the deep gashes or the missing chunks of flesh.

They heard the scream of the harpies again. Minerva and four others, all injured but not severely, casted a blasting curse. They hit one of them right in the stomach and they saw the harpy fall over the railing and hopefully smash against the floor outside. The others broke the glass in the balcony doors and trashed around looking for anything to hurt before retreating quickly. They were gone by the time the second hex erupted from their wands.

“Someone take the injured to the infirmary” ordered Minerva over her shoulder. She had an open wound on her left arm that she was ignoring because the right arm was her wand arm. Her eyes were fixed on the wide doors to the balcony, seven of them. Some remained closed, most had the glass missing, two of them were completely broken.

“Everyone is injured” cried Dean Thomas. “Everyone but Nott.”

“Take the ones not arguing back.”

The ones with missing limbs, the ones passed out from shock or blood loss.

Vincent Crabbe grunted, pushed himself upright and went to plant himself in front of one of the few untouched doors to the balcony. He stared at it considering and kneeled, not without effort.

During the next assault, a harpy came flying at full speed through that door, apparently unconcerned by the glass shards and the splinters of wood.

Crabbe avoided her claws and hit her with a blasting curse, not too powerful, but strong enough to send her in the way of another one. They crashed together and neither of them got to slash Cho Chang’s throat.

***

Things were quite similar on the norther side. There was blood and broken windows and harpies falling down again and again seeking entrance. Behind the few wizards and witches who had managed to get back to their feet and were desperately pushing them out, there were the injured seeing with horror how their lives escaped in gushes through their open wounds.

Kingsley had seen one of them hack Tonks’ throat and he had thought that in that moment they had ripped his heart out. He had seen it, he was sure he had seen it, but the next second Tonks had shot a lime green spell and the harpy had pulled back. He couldn’t spare the time to turn around but he knew that Tonks was in the defence line, he could hear her calling the spells in an angry voice rather than casting nonverbally. So she was alive even if he had thought he had seen her die.
He was trying not to think about Tonks or about Emmelina Vance. It had taken them two assaults before they managed to advance the line enough to reach her. Two assaults in which she was lying still on the floor with her chest open and dark blood coming from it. He couldn’t think about it because he had formed a defence line and he had to hold it no matter what.

The harpies came again and again, too quick to be hit with spells. They had gotten everyone inside by now so they couldn’t do much more damage. The balcony doors were completely destroyed but Kingsley would make sure that the harpies didn’t get further inside. They had the balcony, he had the corridor and the castle behind.

Over the roar of the battle, the spells, the screams, the cries of the injured, Kingsley picked a set of steps coming closer from behind. The steps stopped a bit behind him and he wondered what that person was doing. What were they doing if they weren’t joining them nor helping move people to the infirmary?

The harpies descended two more times. Tonks let a very colourful curse involving the harpies’ sexual habits. She also casted a hex and threw a rock.

Perhaps if someone were to stay behind, without taking action, they would be able to see that there was a certain rhythm to the harpies’ assault. If one were to stay calm and remain back, if they had an ear for music, they could pick the subtle hints from the flap of their wings in the air. They could predict to the second the moment in which they would come flying through the broken doors once more.

“Duck” said a musical voice.

Kingsley ducked. First lesson in Auror training. You heard “duck” and you better have your mouth in the floor in a second.

He heard glass breaking. He had been hearing it for the last twenty minutes, but this time was different. It wasn’t glass from the windows but from a bottle. You had to know the difference when you were an Auror.

The bottle broke and from it erupted a fire that quickly grew into a wall just as they harpies were coming, too fast and too late to stop or change course.

Kingsley got up, saw that Tonks was indeed alive and smiling faintly, saw Snape standing there with two more bottles on his hands.

“Use them sparingly” he said handing him the bottles. “East and south entrances are holding.”

“And the west?”

“They had to collapse the ceiling behind them as they retreated. Technically the harpies didn’t get inside because there is no more inside.”

The flames were still burning. Kingsley felt his eyes prickling with the smoke.

“It will be a pity to lose this position too. We won’t have any good spots to protect the doors from above.”

Severus nodded. “Goyle and Bullstrode are coming with a cauldron full of tar. That should help things.”

They would. Kingsley nodded at him in gratitude, for the help and for the fact that he had not say a
word about this awful blunder. Gratitude for the fact the corridor behind him was almost empty. They had gotten all the injured away. Now there was only the roar of the fire.

***

The infirmary was like a beehive or an anthill. Apparently chaotic from a distance, but in truth a perfectly tuned machine full of movement and light. Usually the infirmary was the quietest room in the castle, tied with the library, but now it was full of action.

Someone hovering over the castle would have no problem finding the room. If they refrained from smashing the windows and killing the people nearby they could get a good look at the patients laying in their beds.

Gillray said that there was a white virgin as a reward for whoever located the woman who had casted the spells outside.

The floor was full of blood. Someone had brought a couple of buckets of sawdust and tossed it around so it wouldn’t be slippery. Usually they would just *evanesco* everything but there weren’t that many casters in the infirmary and they couldn’t be put on cleaning duty. The sawdust worked.

They had many injured and any other time they would had been so overworked that half of them would have bled to death before receiving treatment. Any other time they would had insisted on giving magical medicine exclusively and they would have failed. But it was near the end of year and Pomfrey’s group was formed with refugees, people who had their wands taken or never had one to begin with and had survived on the run with whatever they had at hand.

A few drops of dittany could close any open wound and you didn’t need any magic for that. A potion to give back strength and stimulate blood grow could be brewed beforehand. Slowly the infirmary became less loud as all the patients were treated. A few of them even insisted that they felt well enough to go back to fighting and if they had only been cut and weren’t missing big parts they were allowed to go. They only had so many beds.

Emmelina Vance was in one of them with Pomfrey and Susanna Newhouse working on her, desperately trying to get her stabilized. Elderberry was checking on Susan Bones who had been dead for a few seconds before her heart began beating again, probably after Pomfrey grabbed Death by the ears and twisted them hard to make it go because there was no other explanation to how she had managed to pull that miracle.

Richard Brent was sitting in bed. The sleeping draught he had been given had worn off and he was now considering whether to try to sleep again or slip out, risk Susanna’s anger, and go help on the front lines. He could also stay there and help in another way, holding hands and bringing water to dry and feverish lips and maybe Susanna would be angry at him for being out of bed but she was bound to be grateful too.

Gregory Goyle was sitting next to his friend. He had a bleeding cut on the forehead that had been considered of little importance. Crabbe was in worst condition. While the three cuts on his arm weren’t too deep, the harpy had pulled with such force that she had dislocated his shoulder and torn some muscles there. Vincent insisted that he was fine but he was also grateful for the presence of his friend.

And in a corner, sharing a bed because they were short on them, the Carrows siblings slept the deep slumber of fairy tales. The screams of pain and the smell of blood had reached them and it was giving them interesting dreams.
No one had ever counted how many rooms Hogwarts had. Some Ravenclaw Headmasters had tried to get a comprehensive inventory of the castle’s spaces and none of them had succeeded. The closest was the Marauders’ Map and even that was missing some rooms and secret tunnels.

A broad estimation would say that there were over a thousand different rooms. The harpies had quickly found the one that interested them.

Gillray had promised them a virgin, white and sweet. None of them had stopped to think where she could have gotten such a prize. She had been working with the wizard for months now and to them anyone out of the mountains had natural access to that kind of exquisite delicacies.

Six harpies fell over the infirmary windows, breaking them. One of them lost her grasp and slid down the wall. She most likely opened her wings in time to avoid a big fall. The other five got inside the room.

One of them came perilously close to Susanna Newhouse who hadn’t even lifted her eyes at the commotion, focused as she was in saving Emmelina Vance. That harpy was bludgeoned with a stool by Richard Brent. He didn’t kill her, but he didn’t stop hitting her until he was sure she wouldn’t be a threat anymore.

He saved two lives with that, at least two lives. He saved Susanna’s who had been right in the line of the harpy’s claws, and she saved Emmelina Vance.

A fourth harpy was stopped by Gregory Goyle who tackled her to the ground for daring to come too close to his friend. The world was becoming more and more confusing and Gregory liked the comfort of having his friends around to explain things. She slashed his face and his sides terribly but pain had little effect on Gregory. Pain he could understand. Death and friends going missing, like Draco, he could not.

Three harpies remained.

One slashed at the closest person, scarlet droplets of blood spurting from the new wound. She hissed and attacked again, this time to the one on the other side. Then she opened her mouth to let out a paralyzing scream and only got a squeak as she was transformed into a very angry sparrow. Having shut down the Transfigurations corridor McGonagall had relented and gone to the infirmary to have her arm healed. She had already got it in an improvised sling and her wand arm remained perfectly in use.

Arthur Weasley was also there, sent by Snape to get a recent report on the injured and whatever Pomfrey needed. He hit one of the harpies with a quick series of blasting spells. One of them missed and made a big hole in the wall, although not so big that they could see through it. The harpy kept trying to get away but after two more hits she finally came to a stop.

But the sixth one was nimbler and hungrier than her sisters. She jumped to the ceiling and crawled over it, bypassing the first line of people in the infirmary. Of course everybody saw the adult sized harpy advancing on the ceiling, but she still got some vital seconds while they were distracted with the others.

McGonagall casted a spell, dark grey and smoky, but she missed. Arthur too let out a stream of white light but the harpy deflected it with her wings. If it hurt her, it certainly didn’t do enough to stop her.

More people were turning around and shooting at her, as the threat of the others was dealt with. But
it was still the infirmary in which few could use a wand and those who could had patients to treat. She twirled in the air, easily evading their hexes, and landed in a corner of the infirmary.

She had to know that there was no escape from there. She was too far from the window and the door. Only she was exactly where she wanted to be. True, the harpies had never wanted or expected to get further inside the castle. What for? Closed grounds were to their disadvantage. But she had fought to get where she was because that’s where her prize was. She was so enthralled by the promise of a white virgin (with a milky smell and the reddest blood) that she didn’t stop to consider what she would do next, only that she would complete Gillray’s request and earn her reward.

Given the events of the night and the day before they had all forgotten about the permanent residents of the healing ward. The siblings of pain. They had all forgotten and they didn’t even understand at first what it meant when the harpy extended a hand that was like a claw and slashed Amycus’ neck. The blood came gushing out of the wound like a fountain and just because it was Amycus Carrow it wasn’t any less terrible.

They sent multiple spells at her because even if they didn’t understand what she was doing they could see that it wasn’t good. Their cries as they casted the spells weren’t enough to drown the sound of Amycus Carrow choking on his own blood.

She was there, right in the corner, they could barely miss this time. But it was too late. The harpy fell to the floor, dying but still struggling to get back up. In her right claw she was clutching Alecto’s heart, freshly ripped from her chest. Until her very last moment she still tried to go back to Gillray and give it to her.

The harpy died and so did Alecto and Amycus’ Carrow and with them the wards they had put around the castle, the ones that didn’t let any humans step through, fizzled and went away.

Hogwart’s greatest protection against deatheaters had just disappeared.

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“I am… so glad… that the harpies didn’t get further in” tried Severus Snape, his head hanging low and resting over his folded arms on the table. It did not have the charm of Luna Lovegood’s optimistic sentences. Maybe in a bit, when she was due to get up she could tell them something nice.

It was close to four in the morning. Severus was tired, he had a terrible headache and he was very thirsty although he didn’t know that. He also had a castle with giants and trolls banging at the doors, harpies lashing at anyone who got close to the windows, a flock of firebirds who had gone crazy with the harpies’ screams and, according to the ghosts, a pack of werewolves running through the forest at top of speed in the direction of the castle. It turned out the attacks on the centaurs had been carried by ogres after all. Yet another thing in which he was right and it was for nothing.

“There are no vampires” said Sirius who was better at this. In his mind, silently, he added that there was no Harry or Remus or the little kids and all of that was good.

They had lost their biggest defence, though. That was bad. Those who were resting but not sleeping had been called to join them because for a minute, when they realized the significance of what had happened, they had all believed that Voldemort was going to enter Hogwart’s that very instant. The ones sleeping would rise soon, undamaged and unworn. Having people rest had been a good idea even if they were not going to sleep anymore this night.

“Keep doing as you are” said Kingsley Shacklebolt. He had a nice voice, deep and velvety. He did not use it as well as Severus was it was nice all the same. “You are doing well” he added, and this
time he had exactly the right timbre. “I will start preparing the defence against humans and human- 
like. You keep working against the others. We can still pull this through.”

Severus raised his head a bit so he could nod. “Have that side” he said, pointing at one side of the 
professors’ common room. He stretched his neck as he got up.

That’s all they could do, get up and go back to work.

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“Fred, George” called Kingsley Shacklebolt. “You know the castle better than anyone. You are on 
patrol duty protecting the secret passages in case they try coming from there. Black, duelling with 
Diggle and Arthur, he is still up in the infirmary. Tonks, with Molly and Ezequiel. Moody, you have 
Fletcher” he ignored the simultaneous groans from both Moody and Mundugus “and the young 
Elderberry. I will give backup to all of you as required.”

Everybody got up and started to group as ordered.

“Remember: this is going to be a long fight. Don’t try to get a quick win. They have the numbers but 
we have the terrain in our side.”

“Oh, did we tell you about the horcruxes?” asked Sirius suddenly. “I don’t remember if we did.”

“The what?”

“We didn’t.”

“Voldemort is virtually unkillable unless a series of objects that have a piece of his soul are destroyed 
first” Severus summarized. “Ah, Mister Weasley, you are here.” He nodded to Ron who returned the 
greeting calmly.

Kingsley looked worn by the news but determined. “This changes nothing. We still protect the castle 
and don’t let them take it. Now everybody to the ground floor and the entrances there.”

“Don’t bother, the ground floor is full of trolls. You won’t get a single hit with them in the way” said 
a new voice, firm and collected. Everyone’s wand rose instantly except for Sirius, who was beaming, 
and Severus, who was taking a glass of water.

Percy was there. Percy Weasley with his official Ministry robes open and wearing underneath 
something… something very unlike Percy. His hair was a riot of bouncing curls. He hadn’t cut his 
hair in a while so he looked a bit like a classical sculpture, except for the glasses.

“Perce?” Fred hadn’t seen Percy in such a state since the week of the NEWTs.

“Also the orders are all wrong. I didn’t hear them very well, but they are wrong. Hello, Fred. Is 
Oliver here? Oliver is coming, he will be able to direct you better. They are coming with harpies and 
dementors.”

“We noticed, funnily enough” pointed Ron drily. “And the dementors are not a problem anymore.”

“No?” Percy looked down at his watch and stared at it intently, almost as if he had forgotten how to 
read the hours. “Right, no. The time of bronze and the time of silver are gone. Then is the time of 
blood.”

“Dear Merlin, he has snapped. I knew this would happen.” George confided to Fred. Molly let out a
soft “oh”. The truth is that she didn’t know how to react to the sudden presence of Percy. They had learnt to live with his absence before the war started, and they had learnt not to be afraid for him. He was the only one who was safe in the Ministry.

“Percival is good to see you” Kingsley started to say gently. He was a tough leader, but he also knew how to be patient with people. “But I think it might be better if you just sit here and-“

“Not now, Minister, I have a lot to organize” Percy snapped as he went further inside the room and dropped a plastic bag in front of Severus Snape. Severus hooked a finger on the bag to look inside as if nothing extraordinary were happening. Then again, Severus never looked surprised by anything.

“Minister?”

“Maybe he has been hit with a confundus” suggested Dedalus Diggle.

“Somehow, I always knew he would be the one to go insane. Come on Fred, help me get him.”

Molly covered her mouth with her hand and took comfort in Tonks hand on her back. The way Percy was acting was oddly reminiscent of Barty Crouch Senior, when they found him wandering dizzily around the Forbidden Forest. That was the last they saw of him before his own son killed him. It looked as if Percy had escaped from an equally mad imprisonment. The way Moody narrowed his eyes it said that he was thinking around similar lines.

“Percival!” called Kingsley in a commanding tone. Severus had extracted an iron nail from the plastic bag and looked oddly satisfied about it. This didn’t foretell anything good because Snape also looked on the verge of a nervous collapse.

Percy was looking at the papers extended over the table. “What.” He said. He had mastered the dry tone.

“I am Head Auror Kingsley Shacklebot. Percy, dear, I fear you may be a bit confused.”

“Am I? Why?” Percy turned around to look at Kingsley as if he had just been told that he had a spelling mistake in one of his reports.

“You thought I was the Minister”

“Oh…” Percy stared at Kingsley before blinking quickly and looking around him. Kingsley had strategically put himself between Percy and the others. Moody had shuffled to the door. “Right. Not yet. It is difficult, sometimes. Lately. I don’t know. When I am.”

“You are in Hogwarts.”

“Yes, yes, of course I am in Hogwarts. I know where I am, do you take me for an obtuse imbecile?” The spelling mistake wasn’t such and he was now properly indignant. “It is when, when. I don’t-”

He stopped mid sentence, as if someone had called to him to draw his attention. For a second it looked as if the blue of his eyes had turned white while he looked past Kingsley and beyond the room. If there was a smell of rosemary, it was so faint that it went unnoticed. There was also a draft of air that tossed Percy’s curls but no one else’s.

“You” he said in a guttural growl. If Percy were to murder someone, this is exactly how they would expect him to sound.

(Which was ironic because the times he had had to kill people, he didn’t sound like that.)
He was looking at Fred who had given a prudent step back because never in his life of mischief had he been on the end of such a stare. In two strides Percy was before him, grabbing his lapels with his right hand.

Fred was shorter and stockier and shouldn’t have any trouble pushing Percy away. He lifted a hesitating hand to Percy’s arm and he still found himself walking backwards as Percy pushed him towards a corner. Percy’s eyes were blue, nothing but blue, it was silly to think that a minute ago they had been white. They were murderous, though, Fred had no doubt of that. There was the outline of a skull in his pupils.

Fred’s back touched the stone wall.

“Percy…”

“Step back.” Percy’s arm was surprisingly firm as he pressed Fred against the wall. He was looking to the room, though, to George and the others who had come closer. Not Severus, though, he was still examining the iron nails Percy had brought and didn’t seem to care that a murder was developing mere steps away from him.

“Step back” he repeated, wand high and ready.

They stepped back. Everybody had their wand in their hand. Kingsley and Moody immediately tried to find a position out of Percy’s sight to cast _stupefy_. Tonks’ arm pushed Molly gently but firmly away so she wouldn’t see.

There was now a big empty area in the professors common room, between Percy in the corner and everyone else. Fred took three deep breaths that carried his confusion and surprise. He had a wall on his back and on his side and his immediately older brother right in front, pushing him as if he wanted to embed him in the wall. Deep breaths, one, two, three…

And then came the explosion. Not an explosion per se, but it felt like one. The glass of the windows broke in a million little pieces, followed by three harpies and the worst screech they had heard all night.

There was a flash of red light, purple in the border, moving in an arch like a whip. It was one of Bellatrix’ favourite curses and she executed it with great mastery. Percy’s was somehow different while still having a crisp cleanliness.

A harpy’s head fell to the floor and rolled over the glass shards to the middle of the room. The body to which it had been attached was slumped over the windowsill. There was a severed arm ending in a claw by the farthest window. The headless body had two arms so this one had to belong to someone else.

Of course, they didn’t know that the harpies had been made a promise for the night and that they were intent on getting everything out of it and would fight with ferocity until sunrise. All they knew is that there had been three harpies in the room and now there were not.

And Fred, Fred knew. Others might not realize it but he knew very well where he had been standing less than a minute ago. There was a big puddle of blood to mark the spot. If he had stayed there…

Percy’s body and his iron arm between him and the room was suddenly much less threatening. He was also lowering his wand and taking a deep breath and when he turned to look at Fred his eyes were very different. They made Fred think of the sky in a place very far away. Maybe the sky in Egypt, where the blue had been hot and unforgiving.
“Do you know what flaying is?”

“Hmm?”

“I can’t remember at the moment, but listen, Fred, I am pretty sure that it is painful and if you don’t do exactly what I say I will flay you alive.”

Fred was hearing the words and he actually remembered the meaning of flaying because Filch had made that threat multiple times. He could hear the firmness in Percy’s word and he could also see in his eyes that he would never do so.

A hard and sonorous blow, however, a slap across the face, that may very well be. Fred could see that.

“Go with George and stay together, you hear me? You two stay together and never be more than fifty steps apart. You do not split, you do not work in different places, you do not get out of each other’s sights. Oliver will tell you what to do.”

“Got it” promised Fred. Stay with George. That was easy. That came naturally to them in any case.

“And forget about the corridors. Sirius will do that.”

“Okay” said Sirius.

“… and absolutely not duelling Bellatrix Lestrange” he added, rising his voice. “Not you, not you, and certainly not you. She will kill every single person who engages her. Just. Don’t. Duel. Her. Miss Tonks, I am talking to you. She will kill you in a particularly gruesome manner.”

There was blood coming still from the open neck of the harpy. It made a “glub glub glub” sound as it fell on the floor. Exactly the kind of sound that helped to keep an audience enthralled.

“The problem of the hour will be the harpies still. There won’t be any deatheaters until the sunrise.” He looked around quickly as if wanting to remind himself of the place and time. “I am going to bed. You too.”

Severus rose an eyebrow and nodded without arguing, to everyone’s further surprise. He was still holding the iron nails and he looked very satisfied.

“Isn’t anyone going to ask? Okay, I have to ask” said Sirius “Percy, darling, what are you wearing?”

Percy blinked and easily ignored the “darling”. Sirius had once called him The Most Noble Man on Earth right before he punched him, so “darling” coming from the mouth of the very attractive and electric Sirius Black was nothing.

Percy looked down. Oh.

“Oh” he said a bit sadly and mostly tiredly, he was so tired. “I forgot I had these on.”

It is not easy to live multiple lives at the same time. To see not just one future, but the many futures that may come. He looked at his clothes. It is not like he hadn’t had warning and knew about the importance of today. He could have dressed for the occasion. Put on some nice robes and get his curls in order so he would look the part, all handsome and heroic. But Percy had been lost in thought back then just as he was now so after he came home that weird evening that seemed so long ago, he took a shower and put on clothes automatically. Frankly, he counted it as a success that he had come dressed at all to the big climatic battle. At least now he understood why it had been so cold in the
train station.

“They are called yoga pants” he said, pointing at his thigh. Then he grabbed at the hem of his shirt with both hands. It was purple with a golden print of a lotus flower. “So is the shirt. They are very comfortable.”

“They do look comfortable” Sirius agreed. “You can sleep in them.”

“Yes. I will do that now. Don’t duel Bellatrix, did I tell you that?”

Percy looked suddenly very tired and ashen as if getting a look at his clothes had reminded him of all the work he had done and all there was still to do.

“You made it clear.” Sirius assured him.

Fred and George were now standing next to each other. The presence of their twin had always been reassuring.

“What’s happening?” asked Tonks in a loud whisper. Tonks was nice.

Percy didn’t listen to Sirius’ explanation on Galahad’s actions and identity. Fred was all right, he was alive. He had been close to death for so long and now the moment, that terrible moment that used to cover Percy in acrid sweat, had passed. It had been the biggest thing in his life for years and now it had passed and there were many other big things but he was so tired.

He left the room and went to sleep in the first quiet classroom he could find. He went half blind because now that Fred was not dead his vision was going all wonky. There were three other moments in which Fred could die but he wouldn’t, as long as he stayed close to George he wouldn’t, and Percy had driven his point. The explosion, the stray curse, the knife. Percy had seen all of them not knowing what would trigger them, what chain of events would bring one and not the other. He had seen and he had noticed that George (or Fred, until now he hadn’t known which one) wasn’t there. The twin would die away from his brother and that made it all the more wrong.

Those images flashed over Percy’s eyes for the last time, never to be seen again unless he brought them back in nightmares. Goodbye vision of his brother dying, goodbye.

There were other flashes, some of them new because now that Fred was all right and was going to keep being all right there was a nice empty space to be filled with visions. Look at Ronald go, good lad Ronald. Look at Longbottom jumping headfirst into death. Very bad. But there was daylight in that vision so Percy could wait until then to go find the boy and tell him no.

It was the early morning of Friday and Percy had been going mad since Tuesday’s afternoon. He had caught some sleep on Wednesday and that was it.

He fell gratefully in a divan and was instantly asleep, his pupils still moving quickly under his eyelids.

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“Sorry boys. I would have told you, but we promised not to, and he had just done us a really big favour. They were going to kills us, in the Ministry, I mean, or in transport. So if he asks for a bit of discretion that’s the least we could do. That and keeping an eye on you both and I am happy to say that neither of you has been mutilated.”

There was something very upsetting about Sirius Black explaining something. It was the
confirmation that he wasn’t a complete self-centred oaf, that there was a smart and capable mind behind all the insanity. People didn’t like it, it made them question their judgements.

“You see, apparently it is all very funny but Moony wouldn’t explain why. Severinus also knows, apparently. Did you notice? He was not surprised at all. Probably guessed it, the bastard… Is something about the name Galahad. Nice name, I like all the ‘a’s but don’t see what's the deal with it. Anyway, I recommend doing whatever he says because he can see the future, I should have started with that, I see it now, no need to make that face Moody. Percy can see the future and he wants to get a good one, let’s follow his advice. There.”

Sirius beamed at all of them. His hands were on each of the twin’s shoulders. Seeing his friendly attitude with the twins was also distressing. People had never considered the possibility of those three coming together and seeing that it had already happened produced a feeling similar to having missed the big red comet that preluded the end of times.

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“Iron nails” said Severus simply to professor Slughorn who had just come to their floor from a secret tunnel in the dungeons. The main floor was taken by trolls, but the dungeons didn’t have many of them and the house-elves had locked themselves in the kitchen.

Slughorn looked with surprise at the plastic bag Severus had put on his chest. He opened it carefully, as if he had been told that it contained something very precious.

“What do you think? Moses of Alexandria’s cure against curses?” suggested Slughorn as he took one nail and examined it with the same careful appreciation Severus had shown earlier.

“Perhaps. Also Alkindus’ Remedy for Mayor Injuries. See what Poppy says about it. I am out for this shift.”

Slughorn nodded and changed direction to go to the infirmary. A nice bag of old iron nails! Dropped in certain potions it could help strengthen their effects. Good against some dark creatures and also good to accelerate healing from magical wounds. If the harpies’ claws were considered magical, these nails came at the right time.

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In the typical tradition of siblings, the Weasley children had gone from “Percy Is An Idiot And We Hate Him” to “How Dare You Doubt My Brother, You Heathen”. They had now formed a new group and were making sure that no troll managed to get up to the first floor.

The trolls and the couple of ogres there weren’t that much of a problem. The werewolves coming might be because they were actually capable of understanding the function of a flight of stairs. However, the biggest problem was still the harpies just as Percy had said. Whenever they saw any movement in a window, they attacked, and they hadn’t stopped their assault on the infirmary just because the Carrows were dead. McGonagall was very displeased about it and also doing a great job of protecting the place with Arthur Weasley.

The firebirds were going mad and the little cloister where they were cooped had turned into a small hell. The stone was holding well, but they had melted the lead bars used in the frames of the windows.

It was decided, not only by Ron but Sinistra too, to let the birds out. They didn’t look well trained enough to actually be discerning in their targets so there was a good chance that they would attack
the harpies, rather than the inhabitants of the castle, since they were doing the most noise. They also knew how to bring them back if they became too much of a problem.

They threw a couple of sacks worth of grain into a big cauldron of wine and they dispelled the charms locking the birds. Hagrid, his big beard smoking and his moleskin coat full of burns, waved them away and told them to play nice.

The roof of the Adivination tower immediately caught on fire. It didn’t look like such a great idea then. The harpies did stop attacking the southeast side of the castle though, so that was something. They had reached that point in which a roof on fire was somehow better than the monsters coming through the windows.

Such monster too! They were tireless and fearless and even when they managed to get a good hex on them they still came back with their claws and their teeth and those leathery wings with protruding bones. They came and they hacked and they slashed and if you weren’t quick, if you fell and no one dragged you inside, then they came to you and took their treats. Heart. Liver. Spleen.

They hadn’t gotten much of them, actually, or at all. They had spilled blood and taken some limbs but other than the Carrow’s heart (that she didn’t even get to taste) they hadn’t gotten any of the wonderful presents they had been promised. This made them angrier and wilder. This made them all the more determined to gain some big spoils.

The Ravenclaw tower was close to the infirmary and in there they had set a small laboratory to brew any potion that had a extremely short shelf life or that needed to be taken hot. They didn’t need a big laboratory, thankfully, but they still needed this one to provide better treatment and when you have people who had lost so much blood and chunks of flesh you want to treat them right.

It wasn’t so big and it wasn’t very well lighted, but it was there. At the moment they had two squibs and three witches who had their wands taken by the Ministry (two muggleborns, one halfblood) and Luna, sweet, wonderful, Luna, who came with the famous iron nails and Pomfrey’s petition that they heated four more blood-replenishing potions.

The other witches might had been bigger or fatter or sweeter, but no one had a hair like Luna’s, woven with silver and gold. It is a fact that flying creatures, creatures with wings from the magpie to the dragon, like pretty shiny things.

The window to the Ravenclaw tower was ripped right out of its stone frame. Four claws darted inside, sinking their talons in the white flesh, and pulled.

Julieta, who had the fortune of having black hair and black skin that made her almost invisible in the dark room, was the closest to them. She alternated hitting one leathery arm with grabbing at Luna’s arms and dress and pulling back. She had nothing to do against the strength of two adult harpies and so she saw them open their wings and jump out of the window dragging Luna with them. Luna had blood rivulets coming down her arms and her sides, like tiny mountain creeks in a map. Her eyes were wide open with fear and surprise and she was not screaming, they were taking her and she was not crying out.

Julieta saw a big red ball come down from the sky and hit one of the harpies right in the face, breaking her nose and snapping her head back. Her grip on Luna loosened and the girl almost got her left arm free which wasn’t particularly good when she was at least five floors high in the air. Then there was a, a shadow? Julieta didn’t see it well, only that it passed before her really quick and was lost in the darkness below. She was distracted by the very bright stream of white light that hit the other harpy right in the chest, jolting her just like an electric shock (Julieta was muggleborn).
The harpy let go of Luna, her claws and wings were shaking and failing her, she let go of Luna who was now dangling just from her hand. The one harpy holding her looked dizzy and had blood coming down from her nose.

She opened her claw. Luna plummeted down because she looked deceivingly weightless, like a gentle spirit, but she was a real girl of flesh and blood and bone and when she was dropped she fell like humans do. She didn’t scream this time either, just a short “oh”.

In that moment Julieta wanted nothing more than to see the world burn, to kill those horrible harpies and see them die in the worst kind of pain, but also to kill the man who sent them and all the wizards and witches that followed him. In that moment she would have broken the whole world if she could, just to have them die; in that moment it looked like nothing good or beautiful could live for long so she might as well burn it all and stop the pain. In that moment all her suffering became hate, a hate that consumed her and would have killed her.

“This is so nice! I haven’t gone flying in too long.”

The harpies that had taken Luna were hit with two more spells, or maybe it was four or six, who cared? Enough to send them down, to see them fall, one of them struggling and desperately trying to make her wings work, the other one falling like a stone. They went down just as Luna came up sitting in a broomstick, eyes closed and face turned upwards to enjoy the cold air. Julieta noticed with breathless gratefulness that there was a strong arm holding Luna around the waist. The other arm held a wand because Angelina Johnson was a serious Quidditch player and a good Chaser and she could control a broom just with her legs really well.

Only someone standing on top of the Astronomy tower would see it, and there was nobody there because of the firebirds, but if there had been they would have gotten the kind of view that makes it into epic poetry.

They had arrived in an arrow formation with Oliver at the head. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, scrambling their brains for memories of places up North where they could apparate and when that wasn’t enough just flying over the mountains and the forest and right into Hogwarts. The fire in the Divination tower a beacon that saved them an hour of flight.

Now they were here and they were higher than the harpies and, above all, they were disciplined and well organized. It was just five of them (Lee was on the back of Oliver’s broom), five against dozens and dozens of harpies and the demented firebirds and their indiscriminate attacks. But as Oliver had quickly realized (“because flying strategy matters! Shut up all of you”) they were just five against dozens of individual harpies but they were not against a proper flying army. Other than those two they had just downed, harpies didn’t seem able of much collaboration.

Just as Angelina ascended with Luna seating astride in her arms, Oliver’s group fell over the Ravenclaw tower and cleared it of any harpies attacking it.

“Yes, the twins are here” Luna was telling happily to Angelina. “They will be very happy to see you. They are fine. Well, we are being attacked by Voldemort’s forces, but we are fine.”

“Oh my god, come here, you.” Mumbled a still pale Julieta as she pulled Luna inside. The bleeding on her arms had mostly stopped after completely dyeing her arms red. Luna said that she looked like a ladybug.

That’s it, no allusion to hidden ladybug’s power or arcane rituals. She just thought that she looked like one and it was interesting to share.
“No! Oliver! I have a hammer! I just hit one of those weird women with my hammer. Don’t put me on the ground.”

Oliver made Lee get out of the broom all the same. He left him in the Astronomy tower, however, which had the best views of the castle. Someone with a megaphone or the spell *sonorous* could see where the air force was needed and send them there.

“The Divination tower is on fire, but it’s not like we ever cared for it. We can let it burn... Cluster of harpies on the sixth floor, east wing. Merlin’s pants! That was Angelina Johnson, everyone, setting four harpies on fire. What a woman. This is Lee Jordan narrating the Battle of Hogwarts, everyone.”

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Few werewolves had managed to cross the charms protecting Hogwarts before they were dispelled with Alecto’s death. It seemed that there was too much human in them despite what they had always been told and what they themselves wanted to believe. A werewolf wasn’t human. A werewolf was something more, stronger, faster, hungrier.

Yet only three of them had the endurance to go through the spell and they paid a very high price for it. Romasanta, having performed the feat twice already in less than twenty-four hours, did it again for the third and last time. His body was too weakened from the strain and when he went to draw the centaurs away from the giants he found death in their bows and under their hooves.

Such is the spirit of war. One day you are a hero and your actions change the turn of battle, the next day you die a simple nameless death.

Not being able to pass the charms was an insult to their nature. They made up for it by crossing the forest at full speed and arriving to Hogwarts with the force of a battle ram. Werewolves weren’t animals, but tonight they wanted to be and they unleashed the worst of human nature. Fenrir Greyback was their leader.

He put them in two groups, one in the south entrance, the other on the west with instructions to meet in the middle of the castle and only when they had left a bloody path behind them.

It was the hour of the wolf. The hour of the fang sinking in the flesh. Forget the harpies and their claws, forget the wizards that were only now beginning to arrive. This was their time and they would make it count. Show everyone that the werewolf ought to be respected.

Fenrir jumped over the fallen corpse of the giant chieftain that was still obstructing the main door. He dodged around the trolls that were wandering in confusion around the empty ground floor and even lashed at one of them when he didn’t move aside quick enough. The smell of blood, even the greenish one of a troll, aroused his senses in a rage that was hunger and was lust. The others followed him, equally excited by the sight and the smell of spilled blood, and unlike the trolls around them, they knew how to climb up the stairs, how to dodge the spells casted by the wizards on top, how to leap over the last few steps and fall over the pretty witch with a bow on her hair.

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“I didn’t like these firebirds much at first, but they just ate one harpy so they are all right. And if you look out a west window you might get a look of the twins. Gosh, how I have missed them, I was worried sick. The harpies are trying to send Alicia and Katie to the ground, but the twins are having none of it aaaand yes, our girls just put out the fire on the roof there.”
Lee Jordan lowered his megaphone for a second to get a sip of water from the glass someone had brought him. He also dried the sweat from his forehead and once the harpy that was climbing up the wall got closer he knocked her in the head with his hammer.

Of course they had also tried flying right to the top of the Astronomy tower and take him from there, but Lee could see them and he had a megaphone and a Quidditch team that was quite fond of him. Fred and George were absolutely terrific with their Beater’s bats and they moved as if they had just one mind. Not a single harpy got close to him that way. Not that they had much luck attacking him from below.

Over by the Griffindor tower Oliver was yelling instructions to the new arrivals. Cho Chang didn’t look like she was up for flying given the black scar that marred her face and the bandages on her neck and arm, but she also didn’t look like she was going to listen, so Oliver had her with Duncan Inglebee protecting Ravenclaw tower and the brewery there.

Of course fighting the harpies would be easier if there wasn’t a full flock of firebirds flying around, but they were working on bringing them back to a closed inner patio where Hagrid had prepared them a nice dinner consisting on wine soaked wheat and acorns.

“Three harpies on your back, Oliver. There you go. And they are flocking by the second floor again. Don’t really know why, there is like half a harpy hanging from one of the windows there. I am told a Weasley did it. Cant’ say that surprises me.”

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“There is more people coming.”

“Uhu” said Ron for all answer. He was keeping two werewolves (who looked nothing like professor Lupin) at bay with blasting charms while at the same time holding a bleeding Lavender Brown in his arms.

“Mister Alberfoth Dumbledore, from The Hog’s Head, sent a message via patronus to Mister Kingsley Shacklebolt” Nearly Headless Nick went on. He was helping, like many of the ghosts, he was helping. He was certainly more helpful than professor Binns who yesterday went to give class as usual even though the Headmaster had cancelled them. But there was also something very obstructive in his way of helping. Mostly the way he spoke. The Bloody Baron was scary and seemed like he was considering killing you in your sleep but at least he got to the point quickly.

“Seamus!” barked Ron, not really listening to what Alberfoth, Kingsley or Nearly Headless Nick had to say. He had lost the stairs between the ground and the first floor, and was fighting to keep the corridor and the stairs at the end of it that led to the second floor.

“Mister Alberfoth says that we may expect a small but constant stream of reinforcements. He has been contacted by other wizards and witches wishing to come to Hogwarts to help.”

“Bloody brilliant” said Ron although he was probably referring to the small explosion Seamus had just created that sent the two werewolves flying backwards. Now he could get Lavender the treatment she needed.

“Yes, I thought so too. Mister Kingsley wanted me to let you and Mister Sirius know. Shall I direct the new arrivals your way?”

“Yes, yes” said Ron quickly. The first “yes” was directed to the two house-elves Pansy Parkinson had called to evacuate Lavender. The second “yes” was for Nick because you didn’t grow in the
The way Nick spoke it seemed as if there was a dozen brave old wizards wanting to die honorably with them, and to be fair Alberfoth had made it sound that way with his “bunch of fools” and “will arrive as they come.” The truth was a bit different because it involved two popular Slytherins with connections.

In essence, it was just a bunch of fools coming to Hogwarts and certain death. But Suruchi Sudabar was very judicious and selective over the people she contacted. Wanting Voldemort’s defeat was a requisite but it certainly wasn’t the only one, otherwise they would be more trouble than help. She had a list of names and she also had Marcus Flint in the outskirts of Hogsmeade helping people get to The Hog’s Head or to the Shrieking Shack, whatever they preferred to get to Hogwarts.

“He is miiiiiiiineeeeee.” Said the very first name in Sudabar’s list. Nick had told Ron about them and that was good, helpful, but he hadn’t told him who exactly was coming which is why Nick’s help was so frustrating.

Fleur Delacour was an incredibly pretty girl, but physical beauty is just one thing. Her voice, on the other hand, was quite average and in this moment it had sounded like a particularly enraged frog or a demon-possessed doll.

“You will mange d’la merde et meurs, you connard.”

Also, she was quite foul mouthed in French. Really, the image of the delicate flower came because she was blonde and French and had a certain bone structure, but the actual Fleur was made of murder and gasoline. Everyone jumped aside, opening a path for her to go to Fenrir Greyback who had stopped in his tracks in surprise.

“Va te faire foutre, putain!”

Kill is a word too small for that Fleur did to Fenrir Greyback. He died, oh, he died for sure, but in a way he was more dead than necessary, 110 % dead, so to speak. As if Fleur had killed him three times. Bill followed his future wife and together they helped seal the corridor and put a nasty curse for whoever tried to come this way again.

“That’s all of you, isn’t it?” asked Seamus, still panting from the fight. “All the Weasleys.”

“No, there is another one. Charlie.”

“Uh. What he do?”

“He is a dragon trainer.”

Seamus, Neville and Hannah Abbot all looked up through the window. It didn’t look like there was any space for a dragon to join the airborne battle.

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Sunrise came slowly and on tiptoes. Sunrise came to reveal a castle with smoking roofs and broken windows and doors. Sunrise showed just how many people were laying in the beds of the infirmary and how many more should be resting there but weren’t because their injuries weren’t bad enough. Sunrise showed the shadows under the eyes and the strain and the dust glued to the skin with sweat and blood.

Sunrise showed a damaged castle and its dirty defendants. They hadn’t noticed before but they were
dirty and smelly.

Hagrid had just got back all the firebirds. After the stress of the day before and the night full of action, the birds were happy to make themselves comfortable in a quiet cloister with just some statues for company. The moment they applied a darkness spell over them they all got their heads under their wings and went to sleep.

Without the firebirds the light was now gentle and soft like a mother’s touch. It was white and pink like a fairy’s kiss. It was pretty.

How perfectly unfair that they were the dirty-faced, sweaty, smelly people in the ugly castle and they were the ones standing in the garden with the sunrise light falling over their silk robes and their silver masks.

Voldemort was there.

Nobody had seen him enter and he was now standing a hundred steps before the castle, a tall dark figure that was so clean and well cut. He was surrounded by his deatheaters, all standing in formation around him, wands out and silver in their faces. It wouldn’t last long but for the moment they were beautiful and elegant and looked deathly like the wings of the firebirds or the claws of the harpies looked deathly.

Percy had called it the time of diamond and coal. He didn’t seem to be aware of how poetic his prophecies were.

Voldemort was there and he spoke with a sweet gentle voice that was like the wind dragging the fallen leaves in a cemetery. He said that there would be no mercy, he said that they were all going to die and their blood would wash their unclean essence from the air of Hogwarts.

He sounded so rested, so full of energy. They had paced themselves and they had done well, but they had been fighting for twelve hours now, they were injured and tired, they were taxed mentally even if they were not physically exhausted. They were at such a disadvantage against him, so tall and strong and dressed in impeccable silk. He said they were going to die and it seemed like such a silly effort to put on a fight when they were all going to be killed either way. They might as well finish it early, lay down their wands and get to rest now, forever.

Voldemort was there and they were going to die.

But what Voldemort didn’t know, couldn’t know, is that it didn’t matter. The people fighting him, they were not fighting to protect the school. It was not a battle for a strategic position, not really. It was battle of ideas and morals and so they would fight until their deaths and, if they could, they would fight after that too. They would fight so that the younger children had extra time to escape and they would fight so that the people following Voldemort were destroyed. If they fell doing so, so be it.

They were prepared to die.

Usually this is a good thing for the enemy, half their work is done. But not in this case because it meant that they were not falling back, they were not fleeing, they would fight and fight and erode Voldemort’s strength. If not for them, for the others, so they would get a weakened Voldemort.

As long as one of them survived Voldemort would have lost. It sent the message that he would not walk without facing opposition, that he would not be tolerated, that people would resist and push back. Always.
It was, as Draco would say, about the meaning of things. About believing that someone was untouchable and about proving that he was not. The risk was worth it.

***

Severus was up, so was Percy. They had met by the window at the end of the corridor, two figures against the morning light coming in.

“I don’t know” said Percy, because the unasked question was obvious. “So many things can happen… I don’t know for sure.”

“But is there a chance?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, there is one chance. More than one if you accept certain people dying.”

Severus was a very clever man. He understood well what Percy had barely said. The toll that they would have to pay to bring the monster down. The desperation in trying to avoid it.

“He lives.” Said Percy, stretching his neck to one side and the other. “No matter what, he lives. Now, the other one has gotten busy tonight so I don’t know. But he lives.”

Severus was too afraid to ask, which one lived for sure and which one might not. He saw why for many years the gift of prophecy had been considered a curse.

“You died” added Percy as he did something improbable with his arms, stretching them. “But you are alive so, I don’t know. Don’t get too close to the snake, I guess. There is a snake coming. Very big. Almost killed my father once.”

“Nagini. His pet.”

“Mmh.” Percy had taken two steps back and was sitting down on the floor.

“You have done extraordinary well” said Severus at last, because he was a man that seldom let his feelings rob him of words. “I don’t think anyone has thanked you yet.”

Percy smiled softly. “I… I never expected any thanks, actually. But it is good to hear, all the same. Thank you for that.”

Voldemort had just stopped talking, his words were still hanging in the air. They both knew what he had to say so they hadn’t paid much attention.

“May I ask what are you doing?” Severus asked turning his attention back inside.

“It is called Sun Salutation. You stretch your muscles and greet the sun as it rises.” Percy was making a perfect triangle, back and legs straight and the body folding by the waist.

It was nice.
The morning after

“Tea and toast?”

Ron looked down, happily surprised to find a house-elf (Dobby, who had cried with him when Hermione was taken) with a tray full of slices of toast and a spoonful of strawberry jam over them. Another house elf (Merryl, it looked like) had a big teapot and was distributing hot steamy mugs.

“Yes, please” said Ron taking a mug and two pieces of toast. He looked again through the broken window to the deatheaters in the ground but the effect was now ruined. Before, they had looked so big and mean and dangerous, but now they didn’t. The Dark Lord’s plan had some undesired results because they were tired, yes, they were tired but not exhausted and after a full night of fighting and making them pay with blood for every centimetre they took of the castle they were feeling pretty confident on their ability. More than if Voldemort had come first thing. They had tasted something close to defeat a few times (those damned harpies) but they had also tasted a lot of success (we took your firebirds!). Voldemort just wasn’t as scary any more.

He was also much shorter than expected. Harry’s account made him bigger, but he was not. Ron was shocked to find that Voldemort seemed perfectly average to him.

(Of course Ron failed to realize that Harry was significantly shorter than the very tall Voldemort, whereas he hadn’t stopped growing for the last few years and he could look at Voldemort right in the eye).

Ron bit down on his toast and munched on it thoughtfully while he tried to guess the identity of the deatheaters lining on the grounds. They were terrifying, honestly, they were, but you just can’t be very afraid when you have half a slice of toast hanging of your mouth.

“Is that strawberry? I only got apricot.”

Ron kindly exchanged his second piece of strawberry toast with Neville’s apricot one. He was informed that it was Neville’s third, which he could believe because Neville had also done a lot of growing and was constantly hungry these days.

Ron casted protego over him, wordless and almost motionless, a simple touch to his wand.

“That one is Bellatrix” Neville said completely toneless. “And the blonde one is Georgina Parkinson. Looks nothing like Pansy.”

“We are not supposed to engage with Bellatrix. Percy was very adamant about it.”

Ron knew that Neville had listened and was planning on going after her anyway.

***

The order must had been given in a very soft voice because they didn’t hear it. They simply saw Voldemort raise his arms and all the deatheaters, except a small circle of five that remained with their lord, started to move.

What they heard was Lee Jordan’s voice telling them that the deatheaters were on the move and the exact numbers that were coming to each door and he even identified as many as he could. They were obviously following the path opened by the werewolves that had managed to penetrate into the castle.
There were also trolls and at least a couple of ogres (maybe more) in the ground floor and in the dungeons. The one surviving giant had lost all interest in the battle as was currently treading through the Forbidden Forest. The harpies had retreated with the daylight. A few of them remained but a lesser reward meant a decreased intensity in their attacks.

Not that the Dark Lord needed them. He had openings in the castle, which is what he wanted. His deatheaters would be more than enough for what was to come. In the fight of wizard against wizard the deatheaters were the ones trained in duelling and dark arts, they were the ones who knew curses and countercurses, the ones with the nastiest hexes, the ones with the quickest draw. The castle had teenagers and refugees and less than a dozen aurors.

And Voldemort, who had duelled Albus Dumbledore and made him afraid. Voldemort who was now extending his arms and closing his eyes, holding his wand like the conductor of an orchestra, and oh so delicately conjuring that curse that made spiders and scorpions crawl down the walls. His forces had taken then dungeons, the ground and the first floor and with a strong hold over them it was just a matter of hours before the whole castle was his.

***

McNair had entered with Bellatrix and the other Lestrange through the west door. The Lestrange brothers were quiet and he liked that. Bellatrix, however, was letting out a constant stream of commentary that was very annoying. It was just a series of threats and promises of what she was going to do and while it showed her intentions Walden McNair doubted their effectiveness.

Twice already they had come across people who, as soon as they got a look at them or heard Bellatrix’ voice, yelped and ran away. It was good that they were scared of them and they were now deep in the castle, on the stairs to the fourth floor (that bypassed the third), but McNair wanted to hurt someone already, not walk through an empty castle with people too afraid to present battle.

There was a side corridor, he remembered that. A shortcut to the east wing and he took it and let the quiet Lestranges and the rambling Bellatrix continue their ascension. They could go as far as they wanted, he was going to find someone and kill them in a very painful way.

He crossed the corridor quickly. He thought that no one saw him because an unusually quiet Peeves was easy to overlook. He arrived to the east wing, the one that Voldemort had originally ordered to concentrate the attacks on because it was the least defensible. It was the one that had actually held the longest. It didn’t have many windows or doors but professor Flitwick had turned that to his advantage.

Professor Flitwick, whose blood wasn’t completely human, professor Flitwick who was very kind and extremely patient with his students, who always liked muggleborn Lily Evans and brilliant Sirius Black even if the later was also a headache, who praised Hermione and helped Harry, disastrous wizard as he was. Nice old professor Flitwick who was about to come face to face with Walden McNair who had been the Ministry executioner long before Voldemort came back to power, who killed house-elves and werewolves and goblins and liked his work a bit too much.

Walden McNair who now saw little goblinblood Filius Flitwick standing in the middle of the corridor, a comically small defendant of the east wing.

“Sectusempra” he said, pointing at Flitwick. He made an extra twirl so the curse would slash the half-goblin’s right arm. That way he would be wandless but not dead and McNair would get to cast a couple more fun curses before he definitely killed him. He was thinking he might hang the little body from one of the windows. That would make for a fun sight.
Most charms don’t have a duelling application. That’s what curses and hexes are for. But fires and explosions are charms and evidently useful in a fight, and so are the less studied branch of illusions.

Filius Flitwick was not standing in the middle of the corridor, because he was not a fool. Filius was quietly standing by the door to the side corridor. He was short and McNair had been assaulted the night before so he wasn’t seeing very well out of his bruised right eye. He walked right past Flitwick without noticing and soon got a quick lesson on illusions, and the effects of a levitating charm combined with a big boulder thrown by the giants hours earlier.

Filius Flitwick was a very gentle man and he did not like killing. This means that he did not like killing Walden McNair, but he liked him killing helpless creatures even less. It is the gentle people pushed to extreme circumstances who take the biggest actions.

McNair yelled as he was crushed to the floor. It was a short yell but very loud.

***

It was well after sunrise that the idea finally sunk in Arthur Weasley’s mind. Percy was Percy, his third son, born in summer. And Galahad was the mysterious and helpful figure who left him increasingly frustrated messages whenever Arthur went out to help and came across some small trouble. He now knew that they were the same person but somehow the idea hadn’t properly settled in his brain. Galahad was a folk hero. Percy had trouble pronouncing “scissors” when he was four.

Percy had saved his life countless times is what Arthur was getting now. Percy had killed for him and bought him amazing muggle treats.

“Dear Merlin” he whispered and sat down suddenly to deal with the delayed shock. This meant that the curse that Rabastan Lestrange had just casted flied over his head and made a burn on the frame of a picture.

He couldn’t think much more about it because he now had to duel both Rodolfus and Rabastan Lestrange who seemed particularly angry by Arthur Weasley’s continued existence. It angered them even more that bumbling, muggle friendly, Weasley was a very decent spell caster and was blocking all of their curses.

Rabastan Lestrange was disarmed by a redfaced and panting Dedalus Diggle, which is about the most humiliating thing that can happen to anyone. To be fair, when you have such a ridiculous alliterative name like Dedalus Diggle you either kill yourself when you are a teenager or you learn how to fight. Mister Diggle was now on his forties, close to fifties, so he knew how to fight very well and he didn’t let threats and taunts distract him.

To add further ignominy, Diggle took Rabastan’s wand and instead of killing him, as was proper and civilized, he casted petrificus totalus conjured extra chains just in case and handed him to a couple of children. They were fifteen! They were children, who dragged him to a makeshift holding cell.

Rabastan was so angry that he passed out, bloodshot eyes and foam on his mouth.

Arthur took down Rodolphus Lestrange. He didn’t mean to, he was just countering his hexes. One of his shielding charms must had mixed weirdly with Rodolphus’ curse and the end result was that Roldolphus’ head turned into something resembling a turnip. That wasn’t the worst part, though. Rodolphus stepped back in surprise, lifting his hands to his turnip head, and evidently didn’t see that the stairs that were usually there had moved to their alternate location in the north side.

He fell through the gap of the stairs, hit the ones below, slid down them headfirst and came to a stop
on the second floor where he was hit by a stray curse from Theodore Nott Senior.

“My son Percy is Galahad” said Arthur Weasley to Dedalus Diggle. And then, with less shock and more pride. “He is very smart.”

***

Percy was smart but at the moment he was fundamentally angry and tired. Also, people kept telling him that everything was going to be fine, right? Right? And he was growing weary of saying that he didn’t know.

Fred was alive and George wasn’t mutilated so he supposed so, but that wasn’t the right answer. People wanted something definite and he didn’t have it.

There was a snake to kill, and a very bad man, and there was so much death in these few hours that it overtook everything. Percy was blinded by it, the smell and taste of death. He knew that the good ending had mint and chocolate and coffee in it but all he could taste now was the iron in blood and the day old sweat and an acrid burn.

“Percy!” Bill exclaimed. His face was scarred but the smile was the same, big and friendly. He and Fleur had put a stop to the spider and scorpions curse, and he would soon had to work again as Voldemort conjured a different one. Percy knew that. “It’s good to see you. I see you finally got your head out of whatever dark corner it was… I am glad you are here.”

“… yes.” Said Percy. It was a nice short word. “Yes”, and you were done. Barely took any movement. It was much easier than saying something like “actually my head has been in the right place for years, or it never was, I don’t know; but I have been helping you since before the start, I saved your life, idiot, you have scars but you would be dead if it weren’t for me, I have saved half the people in this room, the only one not needing rescuing is Ronald, honestly, don’t get me started with Dad. I am just so tired. And now excuse me, I have to go slap silly the pug-faced girl, she is going to attempt duelling Bellatrix.”

Bill laid a hand on his brother’s shoulder, happy beyond words to see him. Percy put his hand over his and squeezed it before smiling tightly and going to find the Parkinson girl and slapping her so hard that she fell on her ass. Percy who, as already said, was a bit tired, would only say “no” to Pansy and she wouldn’t even be angry with him.

“What about my family?” she would yell as Percy went his way to give Mundungus Fletcher some much needed relief.

“I’m afraid the pale boy got to your father first. There is a big girl fighting a blonde woman at the moment. I saw them on the stairs to the fourth floor.”

Pansy let out a curse against Theo and ran upstairs to find Millicent Bullstrode going against Georgina Parkison. It wasn’t easy. Going against your parents, fighting them, it wasn’t easy even when you knew they were wrong, even when you knew they would hurt you and even kill you to keep their power and their posts. It was you parents and it wasn’t easy.

Now, duelling your friends’ parents, sparing your friend the grief and letting out some of your pent-up rage, that was very easy and good and even healthy.

Georgina Parkinson wasn’t her mother but her aunt, and she had been the first one to sneer at her and say that if Pansy didn’t behave they should kick her out of the house. She had pushed and pushed until the idea of abandoning the house and all Pansy had ever known, all her world, had been a
relief. Going destitute into a big new world had been better than enduring one more day in the same house as that bitch.

Millicent’s help was appreciated, but this fight Pansy fought herself.

***

“I am fine” claimed Alastor Moody, who was not. He was alive, when Rookwood was dead and smoking on the floor, so he certainly was better than the enemy. Jugson was also on the floor shaking with Tonks and the funny Elderberry standing over him. They had won. They had faced two very dangerous death eaters (Rookwood had a famous affinity to small explosions, the ones that took your fingers away) and they had won.

They hadn’t come unscathed. Tonks had been hit with debris from a broken wall after a curse blew it up. She said bruises were a nice change from all the bleeding she had done for the past year and a half and turned her hair purple for the occasion. Moody, however, had been hit death centre by a venomous hex and he was, unarguably, dying.

“I’m all right. Have had worst. Let go” he argued, and because he had been hit with the hex but still kept enough wits to cast back and kill Rookwood, others might had listened. Because he hadn’t fallen to the ground, because he wasn’t bleeding and he could talk, others might have stepped back and believed his words.

The Scary Elderberry worked with people that also sputtered quite a lot of nonsense so she ignored Moody and dragged him to the infirmary by his ear where they gave him an iron reinforced potion and saved his life.

***

They hadn’t really seen anything quite like it. No one had taught them about it, no book mentioned it. They said that Dumbledore had been able to do similar things, and Grindelwald, but Dumbledore was dead and Grindelwald might be, in his mossy cell far away. Voldemort was here, that was the important point. He was here and he was making the kind of magic they only ever saw in the little excerpts in chocolate frogs. The old magic, the unchecked magic, the one that put you in legends and required more than a Latin word and wand.

After the spiders and the scorpions (that could still be found scurrying on the corners) he had done something that made the stone sweat blood and, more worryingly, turn so hot that it looked like they would be roasted alive if they stayed inside. Even his own death eaters had looked anxious and had to remove their silver masks to wipe the sweat from their brows. It was suffocating, it made taking each step a wondrous feat, it felt as if everyone had a big weight over their shoulders and some even developed welts on them. Zacharias Smith looked around slowly wondering why everything was suddenly higher and it took him a full minute to realize the heavy heat had pushed him to his knees. He might have died right then, but Mr. Goyle was leaning against a wall huffing like a bull and was unable to get the words out to cast the spell.

Bill and Fleur worked desperately and drenched in sweat. They had Ginny at their backs, protecting them while they kneelled on the floor and drew the diagram of what they had to do (blessed study abroad in Egypt, Bill never thought it would be so useful). Soon after they got the help of Evelyn Scamander via Suruchi Sudabar and The Hog’s Head and at last they put an end to it. It would take days, however, for the castle to go back to its usual wet cold self.

Voldemort wasn’t pleased. Right after the heat went away he released a form of nightmare, a night fury that ran around the castle letting a scream that took years of life and sent people crying with fear
to the floor. Of course they had all heard the equally horrifying wail of the broken horcrux so most of the castle kept going, if slightly deafened.

***

“You bastard” Lucius snarled like an angry animal, his lips going over his teeth, “you little bitch!”

Severus stopped in his tracks, surprised. He hadn’t thought that Lucius would care enough to be so angry. He hadn’t expected him to show mercy or offer him help for old times’ sake because Lucius cared about himself first and above all; but for that same reason Severus had thought that Lucius would fight him and attempt to kill him in a business-like manner. Nothing personal, just what he needed to do to stay on the top, pity to see each other on different sides when they could have thrived together.

Instead, he had before him a man full of wrath, a man with the worst kind of murder in his eyes.

“I made you!” he barked, loud and angry and full of energy when Lucius prided himself of his exquisite self-control. “You were nothing! Less than nothing. You filthy little bitch, I made you. You belonged to me! Do you think you can now —?”

Severus could tell that Lucius was about to air their past history. Perhaps remind Severus of how dutifully he had followed him, how he had clung to his words and his arm and specially how eagerly he went to his bed. Severus had loved him and wanted to be loved and he had done anything to get that love. He had been pliable and stupid. Lucius would now take that and he would twist it until the words and the memories were one black sharp mass that he could thrust against Severus like a knife.

He would tell Severus that he was an ungrateful whore and he would remind him of some of the things he had done in his bed. Things that, to Severus, were less shameful than the things he had done when dressed and standing in a circle before Voldemort. He would tell him that he had no business betraying them when they had given him everything.

But all he did was scream, long and loud, a scream dense with pain. Severus stared, still taken aback by the strength of Lucius’ fury because it had to mean something that he cared so much about Severus’ actions. Too surprised to do anything, he lifted his wand slowly just in case while he watched Lucius flail around and trip, his left hand ineffectually trying to find purchase on the floor to get back up. Lucius then tried to push his attacker away but his right arm, his wand arm, was firmly clamped in the jaws of the dog, jaws made of steel and with teeth that were like the idea of a knife.

The dog was big and black and it had a strong thick neck. When it shook its head it dragged Lucius around like a puppet. Ragdoll, was the word. Dragged around like a ragdoll, that was exactly what Severus was seeing. Dragged around like a ragdoll by a huge dog that did not care about what Lucius had to say. The effect was enhanced by Lucius’ long mane of white blonde hair that made him look even more like a doll.

The dog kept dragging him steadily and not too slowly. Behind there was Lucius’ wand, fallen to the floor the moment the teeth sunk into flesh, and a path painted in red. When they reached the wall the dog turned around violently and released its grip, sending Lucius crashing against the wall. Lucius’ right arm was broken in addition to the torn flesh, not that it mattered much when Lucius had no wand. Even then, even if he had had his wand, he would have had to be very quick because he soon found a heavy paw over his neck and the dog’s head lowering over his face and growling.

This was the growl. What Lucius had done before was nothing. This was the true growl of an angry animal. The one that made you think of your ancestors hiding in a cave.
Lucius could see his own blood falling from the dog’s mouth, maybe even his own flesh still clinging to the teeth. Severus had once been in a similar position, albeit he hadn’t been hurt just unpleasantly close to the jaws, and he knew how utterly terrifying it was to feel the hot wet breath of a beast over your skin.

The paw over Lucius’ neck became a hand, the growling head turned into that of a man. Sirius rose to his feet pulling Lucius with him. His right hand grabbed Lucius by the waist, the other still on his neck. Lucius made a sound that was something between a sob and a “no” and his left arm moved slightly, weakened by pain and terror and incapable of stopping Sirius even a little bit.

Sirius’ arms strained as he lifted. He was not a big man, certainly not like Remus, a bit shorter than Severus although Severus was so thin that he looked taller than what he really was so they might be the same height. In any case, tall or not, Sirius was perfectly capable of lifting a grown man to mid height, which is what he did, and then shove him through the window and let him go.

Severus made sure to look on both sides and check that the corridor was free of intruders before walking to Sirius.

“He hurt Draco” said Sirius with a voice halfway between a man and a dog. Dark, raspy, hot.

“Never again” Severus agreed. “Here, have some water. Rinse.”

Sirius accepted the bottle Severus offered him. He rinsed and spitted twice and he drank the rest. Severus stood by his side quickly processing the fact that Lucius Malfoy was dead.

***

“This is a very realistic statue” Gregory Goyle informed the rest of the group. They were in the corridor on the north-east section of the third floor which had a statue of an ugly witch with a nose the size of celery, two boring paintings covered in dirt, and not much else. There was also a room at the end with some nice big windows. The Marauders had once climbed down of them.

“If you put your head under her skirt, you can actually see—” continued Goyle, but he had to interrupt himself as he blasted one of the werewolves who had followed them all the way there. Fleur had inflicted them big damages and they had all quickly learned to fear her, but since she was occupied with countercurses the werewolves had reorganized, made Venzel Sharppaw the new leader, and gone back to killing as many people as they could. Ron and his groups had been fighting them for two hours now and for two hours they had been slowly retreating, losing more and more terrain, until they found themselves in this boring little corridor with an interesting statue.

They were close to the end of the corridor, their backs against a bit of wall and the door to that room with nice big windows. Before them stood fourteen werewolves who seemed barely affected by the curses they were casting. They had incredible endurance, the werewolves. They also looked nothing like Remus Lupin or Philip, this was something that kept being said. Neither Remus nor Philip had made the kind of comments over the supposed tenderness of their necks that they kept hearing now. Crabbe refused to believe that anyone would look at him and think he was edible, but Crabbe was still a bit self-conscious over his acne.

“I will gnaw on your bones” said one of the werewolves, one of the fourteen. It wasn’t clear who he was talking to.

“ehehe… I think I will let you watch as I eat your guts” said another, one of the smallest, with a nervous giggle.
“Dibs on the fat one.”

Fourteen big bad wolves and five young boys in a small corridor that took nowhere.

“Who are you calling fat?” asked Justin Finch-Fletchley, not that it mattered. Ron had to bite down a nervous giggle. It reminded him of that Christmas break in a muggle street almost a year ago.

There was an interesting statue in that corridor. There were two old dusty paintings. There was also a red line painted on the floor marking one third of the corridor’s length. When the last werewolf crossed that line the five young boys yelled in unison because they had been waiting for this for two long strenuous hours. They yelled and Minerva McGonagall and Andromeda Black stepped on the other end of the corridor and brought the ceiling down locking them inside.

The five young boys darted through the open door on the back and across the room with nice big windows and to the people waiting on broomsticks by said nice big windows. They ran very fast because they had had two very long hours to see what those werewolves were capable of, but they needn’t run that much. Severus Snape had studied a lot about how to stop a werewolf, transformed or not, and knew exactly the dose of aconite required to make one, of fifteen, grown werewolves drop dead on the floor.

The ones who didn’t follow them into the room and thus avoided the poison would have to stay there in the boring corridor with the interesting statue, and that also worked. No more werewolves wandering free in Hogwarts, not if they were this nasty.

***

Percy was very familiar with Bellatrix’ face. He had seen her a lot. He had seen her killing Sirius Black, and then when that didn’t happen he had seen her killing him again in a different time and place. In the Ministry, in a country road, in the forest, in the boathouse, near the library. She really wanted him dead.

He had also seen her killing Remus Lupin. He had seen her at least a dozen times. Sometimes she also murdered Nymphadora Tonks at the same time, sometimes it was Severus Snape.

He had seen her kill Dedalus Diggle, and his sister Ginny, and one of the Patils. Percy had seen many deaths and Bellatrix’ face was in many of them.

“I will eat your arm” he had told Neville, because Percy was at his wits’ end and he didn’t know how to threaten anymore but he also knew he wasn’t letting that boy go get killed by her. He would not give her that satisfaction.

The result was that people had taken his words seriously and everybody was actively avoiding Bella. They would have to do something about her eventually and Percy was so tired and stressed and sick of seeing images of death that duelling her and succumbing to the wounds was looking more and more like a good idea. He would die but she would fall too, and that’s what mattered to him. He would have stopped her and he wouldn’t have to worry about all those faces still and pale and accusing.

The stairs were just there. Just a flight of stairs up and then the second corridor to the left and they could kill each other.

He didn’t do it. He was standing by the stairs when he came across his father who hugged him silently and maybe even sobbed on his shoulder which felt very wrong. It stopped Percy, though, and helped to bring him back from his stupor as he rushed from one place to another saving people.
He took the hug and for a minute he stopped thinking about death and got to feel again the echo of a good ending.

***

People were avoiding Bellatrix. She was seeking them out.

Eventually she had ended up alone which is a terrible thing to happen when you are storming a castle. She was supposed to be with McNair and Rodolphus and Rabastan, but she was alone. She had seen Gibbon a while ago and Silas Carrow. She was surprised than the latter was able to climb up the stairs but he was such a spiteful old man that the strength of that spite must had carried him. Bellatrix didn’t like him, he used to stared too intently at her. Few things made her uncomfortable, but the dirty gaze of Silas was one of them.

She had nodded at him and ignored his call as she went down yet another deserted corridor. Bellatrix was a very clever woman. She had noticed they were avoiding her, so she was now looking for those places they would not abandon, those places where they would have to face her and die because they simply couldn’t go.

Her lord had conjured a new curse. All the water in the ambience was boiling and turning black. She liked it. The black rivulets of water that escaped down the walls looked like her hair. She liked it because it wasn’t her words but his.

She was of a mind to go to the infirmary. They couldn’t run from the infirmary and it would be hilarious if she were to kill all the little traitors they had worked so hard to keep alive. She might spare one just so he could tell the others.

She might do that but through the gap of the stairs she spied a bright red braid. That would be sweet too, the only Weasley daughter. The youngest. She would kill her and she would show her severed head to her family, show to everyone what happened to the blood traitors.

Bellatrix licked her lips as she began to descend. The girl was protecting two people, one of her brothers looking at his hair, so she was not going to abandon her post. Very, very good.

***

Molly was the mother of a very big family. This meant two things:

Number One was that she couldn’t remember a time in which she had financial stability, a time when she could buy new, actually never used, clothes. She thought it might had been when she was pregnant with Percy and before Lupin came to work to the workshop.

The second point was that she had been the mother of a very big family at a time of war. She had lost her two brothers and a brother in law and she had five small children and a sixth on the way at the peak of the last Wizarding War.

They had talked about it. They had talked about money and about Arthur being slightly less vocal in his muggle support. They had talked about the things they could change and the ones they could not.

Molly couldn’t change his husband’s nature, she couldn’t make him take less risks. She could change her life style, though, that was something she could do.

She quit her job and learned to adjust to life with a single income. She got chickens and an orchard to supplement the food for the family. She learned to mend everything and polished her budgets skills.
She stayed at home because they had talked about it and they both agreed that if the death-eaters came, and they were bound to come eventually, they both wanted Molly Prewet Weasley to be there. She was not the most talented witch or the best at combat, but she had a killer instinct that her husband lacked and she was sure to protect her sons.

Molly let out an incoherent scream when she saw Bellatrix Lestrange go after her youngest and her eldest. Bella turned around to look and, when she saw Molly screaming and running towards her, she smiled with delight as if Molly were a funny addition to her game.

Then she turned around and casted a curse against Ginny, her curse, the red one with purple accents on the edges.

Ginny deflected it. Ginny had had a very intense counter-attack course since the beginning of the term. Bellatrix casted again and this time Ginny couldn’t stop it but she dodged it. The wall behind her developed some cracks and something green and gooey grew on them. Fleur rose her eyes briefly and shuffled to the side to avoid the green thing. It was a problem, but the much bigger curse that Voldemort was casting at the moment was also a problem, and unless they wanted to choke to death in the next ten minutes they had to see about blocking it. She and Bill were the only ones prepared to deal with it so Fleur ignored the green thing. Bill met her eyes and bit his lip because as much as he would like to stand up and kill Bellatrix he knew he had to stay down and be slow and precise or it wouldn’t matter at all if they stopped Bellatrix because they would all die right after anyway.

Molly was halfway there. She stopped in her tracks abruptly to block a curse that Bellatrix had sent her way because this was Bellatrix Lestrange, the best duellist of the century, and she could toy with two witches in opposite sides. Ginny was doing well but she had had to jump and dance to get away and that is never a good sign in the first few minutes of a duel. At any moment you will lose your footing or you will ran out of floor and then you will be hit right in the chest.

It shouldn’t be possible for Bellatrix to keep pushing Ginny into a corner while at the same time stopping Molly’s progress. At one point Fleur had had to get up and let out a fireball so Ginny could get some breathing room. The worst part was that it didn’t seem like Bellatrix was exerting herself. She had a few loose strands of hair and that was it. She moved with the grace of dancer as she made the other women duck and dodge like string puppets.

And then it happened. Ginny was a second too slow and a severing curse grazed her, drawing a thin red line on her neck. It wasn’t bad but it was enough to rip Molly’s heart out of her chest.

She screamed once more as she charged and covered the last few steps of the hall. She didn’t even notice when Bellatrix casted a stunning spell against her. It didn’t hurt. She heard Ginny cry and she though that she was in pain when in fact she was just reacting to seeing her mother being hit.

Never in her life had she ever hated someone so much. Not even when he heard about Gideon and Fabian, not even when she learned of the muggles that had Harry before he was taken.

And to see her laugh! To see that beautiful mouth full of mirth when Molly was experiencing the worst pain of her life.

(Nobody paid attention to the steps they could hear above, descending the stairs at full speed).

“Diffindo! Stupefy! Petrificus!”

Bellatrix stopped the first and dodged the others. She made a spiral motion with her wand and a black cloud emerged from it and fled towards Ginny. Almost right away, impossibly quick, Bellatrix
made the opposite movement and from her wand came some red light and Molly’s wand jumped out of her hand.

Bellatrix had disarmed and tortured and killed many people, but the only other person who had ever felt something similar to the horror Molly felt now was Alice Longbottom. And even through her ordeal Alice had the comfort that they hadn’t taken her son.

How beautiful Bellatrix was when she smiled.

“Oh, don’t you worry, darling. I think I will keep her alive…”

Bellatrix gave a half step and pointed at Ginny who was once more between her and Bill and Fleur and looked determined to fight. She was a good fighter and her defences had improved recently, but she was not good enough to best Bellatrix in combat. Nobody was. Bill’s voice was frantic as he recited an incantation, but he couldn’t interrupt it, not now and neither could Fleur although both were considering it.

Molly didn’t think, she just acted, like an animal. She was pure instinct and pain. She covered the five steps or so that separated her from Bellatrix running as fast as her portly figure allowed her, and she let herself fall over Bellatrix tackling her to the ground.

Bella thrashed like a snake stepped upon. She scratched and pulled with hands like claws. It hurt, but seeing her daughter in danger had hurt more, so Molly bore it without complain. She clamped her hands over Bella’s arm and pressed her body against hers, trying to pin her down with her weight. It wasn’t easy. Bella was unexpectedly strong and she was kicking and punching and she had managed to free an arm.

Molly knew that any moment now Bella would get her wand pointing up and then, well, then Molly would be right there.

Someone was coming. Molly saw a figure out of the corner of her eye and if it was another deatheater then she would be lost, bye bye, but she had also seen Ginny being pushed aside by Tonks who had taken her place, so who would be the real loser, mmm?

Bella, lying on the floor, saw her first. Molly couldn’t spare a second to look over her shoulder as she struggled to keep Bella down. She absentmindedly noted that it must be a woman because she was hearing the click of short heels rather than the shoes or boots that men preferred. It didn’t mean much. Voldemort had always accepted women in his lines.

Bella’s face lightened with a smile, pleased and cruel. Molly raised her shoulders in preparation and shifted her knees so that when she fell she would crush Bella under her weight. Any second that Bella was kept away from her wand was a second in which the others could prepare. Bill could finish whatever he was doing and take Ginny away.

“How… is… your child?” Bella managed to say while Molly hit her and she hit back. Molly forgot about everyone in the room that wasn’t Bella and her children. She forgot about Tonks and about the deatheater standing behind.

It was not a deatheater. It was an angry woman, the second best of her year in Transfigurations, not that good with Charms and, appropriately, lacking charming social skills. Bella’s words hadn’t been directed to Molly, but to her.

“Cor marmor” she said.

Bella had two seconds, two horrible seconds, to feel her body shutting down as her blood, her pure,
pure, blood, stopped pumping through her body and her heart turned to stone.

Bellatrix Lestrange was very beautiful in death. Her mouth of full red lips was slightly open, her skin was white, her head of black curls fell around her like a crown. She was beautiful and looked like a tragic princess of a fairy tale. The tragic sweet princess victim of the ugly witches.

Molly was still on top her, fat and sweaty and wearing ugly clothes, her hair was dry and unkempt, with some strands of grey that somehow age people more than a full head of silver. Bella’s killer was also old, with grey hair that looked like dirty stone and a sour face carved from old rock. Her hands were a bit too thick and the fingers a bit too short, graceless and unpolished. Together they looked like horrible harridans, terrible, hateful, ugly women who had fought and killed the dreamily beautiful woman on the floor.

Molly heard the woman fall to her knees, crying. She didn’t sound like she was used to crying, as if she didn’t know what to do with her body, how to breath, how to let the tears out. Her right hand had opened letting her wand fall to the floor, somewhere between Bella’s left hand and Molly’s skirt.

“It’s not enough…”

“Oh, sweetheart” said Molly, lifting herself (because Bellatrix was dead, she was dead, no need to keep her down) and throwing an arm over the broad and bony shoulders of Augusta Longbottom.

“Just once… it’s not enough” sobbed Augusta. She had avenged the son she had lost. She had avenged him, but now Alice remained without vengeance although she suffered the same crime, and Neville who was orphaned so young. They wouldn’t get revenge because Bellatrix was already dead and Augusta was finding that Neville had been right, she hadn’t gone well about it, she had fed on the pain and the fear and she had driven away the one good thing she still had.

She had killed Bellatrix Lestrange and it was not enough.

Molly was hugging her, her skin was warm and her clothes coarse and Augusta thought that she felt very cold.

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“Go hug your mother” Tonks told Ginny in a whisper. “And when these two are done” she added pointing at Fleur and Bill who looked like they had gone through a hurricane “I’m going to go find mine and hug her too. Augusta came with some Special Operators gone rogue, they can stay here with your brother.”

Ginny nodded silently, her lips white with fear. Tonks waved at the S.O.s and put them in a circle around Bill and Fleur.

***

There was something going on in the battle. What that was, it was hard to say, but there was something, something beyond the presence of an actual prophet like Percy Weasley. It was like having a small god, like those lars that used to take care of households in Roman times. A small invisible presence helping things along.

No, it wasn’t Peeves. Peeves was very loudly harassing the few trolls that remained in the castle. His help was more than evident.

It was something like a harpy climbing to Lee’s tower and being suddenly hit with a spell and falling down.
Something like Parkinson’s Father being found unconscious in the dungeons for no good reason given that the zone had been captured very early.

Something like the aim of the deatheaters fighting on the grounds or near the windows being a bit off and always missing for just a hair, as if they had been *confounded* or something.

Something like Voldemort rising a storm and thunder that would crush the Headmaster’s tower but not getting a good hold of the power. The thunder shook everyone in the castle and broke over twenty windows but the thunderbolt was half a metre to the right and it fell in one of the inner patios. It pulled up the stones from the ground and set a small fire, but that was very little when it could have destroyed the central tower and everything under it.

There was just something *off*, something going slightly wrong that made it right. Spells missing their targets, *protegos* that shouldn’t have been casted coming over a student, a barrier going down and someone crossing it only to erect the defences back.

And then a voice that was like cold water and a silver bell saying with exquisitely clear pronunciation “THANK YOU SO MUCH, OH, I SEE THIS IS ON.”

They had all heard Lee’s updates on the battle (*It is my pleasure to inform you that Bellatrix Lestrange is dead, I repeat, Bellatrix is dead*). This voice was different.

*Something* was definitely acting in Hogwarts but it couldn’t be explained, not unless one went twelve hours back and nine hundred kilometres south, to London and the wizarding district there.

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What happened twelve hours before and nine hundred kilometres south

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“Excuse me, can you tell me what is going on, please?” said Harry Potter, the son of Remus Lupin.

“Tis all rumours” mumbled Mr. Fortescue as he pushed them aside and quickly walked away.

“I am a very important person and I am very busy” said Draco in an excellent commanding tone that denoted how well-bred he was and how everyone else wasn’t. “Tell me what is going on.”

Stan Shunpike stood at attention.

“The Lord is going to take Hogwarts” he said quickly, his eyes staring in the middle distance because there was still such thing as classes and not looking rich people in the eye. “He will give his brand to those who prove themselves in combat. And loot! And honour!”

“It’s the time to make your fortune” said a similar looking young man just a step behind Stan.

“We want to go now” added a third with a vague resemblance to Piers Polkiss, Dudley’s friend. “But they are only taking creatures tonight. I suppose they want them to do the grunt work first, as is proper. Wizards will go tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you” said Draco coldly.
This explained it. Diagon Alley had come alive as the day died. Nowadays the street was mostly deserted even at lunch time and during the rush hours, and it had a layer of damp silence over it. Tonight, however, they place was full of activity and people coming and going. The time to get your fortune, as the young man had said, and get a brand on your arm no matter your origins. If you were lucky maybe even part of the loot.

In a quieter voice some people said that this was the time to move those guests you had in your attic on in your cellar and get them to Calais. They said that the Irish were using the distraction to rise and that they had killed the Wizarding British Governor and assaulted the palace, which was untrue. They governor had fled at the first signs of trouble and with the giants gone the Irish barely had to resort to any violence, which let them all feeling unbalanced.

“Hey, are you Harry Potter?” asked the second man, not Stan and not the Piers-looking guy. “You look like Harry Potter.”

“That’s preposterous” said Harry, Severus’ son.

“Stupefy” said Hermione who had been, and still was, in a mood. “What really bothers me” she said as if nothing extraordinary had happened “is that my gut feeling was right.”

Hermione was a creature of logic. The sudden irrational fear that George Weasley was in trouble had been a novel experience, finding that there really was trouble brewing felt like a slap to logic and rationality. As if she suddenly started to make accurate predictions by looking at the tea leaves. She didn’t like it.

***

Returning to the Ministry was less odd than expected, perhaps because it didn’t feel like the Ministry of Magic. It was not the building that Harry had visited before, the machine of bureaucracy and crazy cogs, and it was not the sunken fishbowl from where they had escaped not so long ago.

The floor and the walls were still a very dark green, but the hall was full of yellow light when it had always been a bit dark. It was also full of noise, a tumult of a thousand feet and voices with different questions, nothing like the uniform buzz as they looked for three undesirables.

Apparently, just an hour before it had been much worse because they had had a dozen giants waiting in the hall. Now they were finishing with the werewolves, a few wizards in sky blue robes hurriedly trying to get them in line.

Draco examined the crowded room and pushed them gently towards a line of reasonably well dressed people who, as a bonus, didn’t smell like something dead and rotten in a wet forest.

“We are sympathizers” he said in his French accent. Hermione murmured a couple of sentences in Bulgarian that luckily nobody understood. It had rained that afternoon in London and Hermione’s hair volume had rose, making her two centimetres taller than usual. She looked foreign enough and like she had just arrived from the continent. That was the thing. Wizards could just apparate in Hogsmeade and await instructions, as a tired fat witch kept telling people by the gates, but the creatures (which were wandless) couldn’t apparate and had to be ferried there.

Foreign wizards would not have visited Hogsmeade and therefore didn’t have a mental image to go there. Foreign wizards were perfectly justified in taking the portkeys like everyone else.

They had to wait for an hour to take the portkey to Carlisle. In that time, since it was night and there was quite a lot of movement, Harry felt himself assaulted with burning questions. He didn’t even
pretend to have an accent as he chatted up the vampires (turned out the whole line was made up of vampires) standing before them. He asked them all sort of questions which they answered quite pleasantly because Harry seemed genuinely interested and everybody likes to talk about themselves. Mostly, Harry wanted to know if they could get sick.

They did. Draco discovered that the average vampire was quite the hypochondriac and for a creature that was supposed to be strong and unable to age, they had all kind of ailments. Sunshine was one, although they all agreed that Britain was hardly a problem in that respect (this didn’t stop them from telling them in detail about their adventures in Spain and Italy). There was also garlic of course, and mirrors, and genisteae, and cats, and a kind of mushroom, and three different types of moisturizing cream.

Draco had a glazed expression over his eyes and was nodding and saying “yes” and “right” on automatic. Hermione was pretending not to understand English so she could read a book (she had a piece of cloth to hide the cover).

Of course Hermione was the kind of person to bring a book for the wait when infiltrating the enemy and riding along for free to the big battle.

Harry was just happy to talk and he was so charming (“I tell you, Federicus, he is sooo charming, don’t you agree?” “De-light-full”) that they were happy to talk in turn and the wait didn’t feel very long at all.

At midnight they finally got the portkey to Carlisle where they had to wait another hour. This time, thankfully, without any ogres around. The absence of their smell was loudly celebrated by everyone.

“Zadnick!” said Hermione, to remind everyone that she didn’t speak English.

They waited in there another hour which felt much longer than the previous three ones. From there they got another portkey to Dundee where they took a train to Hogsmeade that was supposed to arrive at six in the morning.

They found a compartment for themselves and they got some time to reflect and think that what they were doing was a bit bonkers. They had their wands and their sweaters but they had just jumped at the occasion and where moving with no plan. They just knew that Voldemort in Hogwarts was bad, and that they had to get the Hogwarts’ horcrux first at the very least.

Soon two other vampires joined their compartment. The train was quite full (although it didn’t have that many wagons) and since they couldn’t talk openly they went to sleep.

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The train arrived to the station in Hogsmeade at five minutes past six bringing two parties of vampires (over forty in total), a wagon full of ghouls (that didn’t merit compartments and simply stood there like cattle) and three foreign wizards that had decided to join the glorious battle.

The vampires alighted first because they were vampires. Strong, able to fly a bit, could tear someone’s throat out. It was exactly what they wanted to see in Hogwarts to support Voldemort’s attack. Like the werewolves, they could open a path for the death eaters. The ghouls nobody liked much but they could always eat the stragglers and those trying to escape the castle as there undoubtedly were some.

So the vampires came to the platform first because they were, quite simply, more precious. The brisk wind of the morning moved their capes and the carefully coiffed hair as they got out. They gave a
few steps and then, abruptly, began to scream. It was the kind of scream of a toddler that has been told not to stick the paperclip in the electric plug; raw and angry and surprisingly loud. The vampires in the platform screamed their heads off and immediately tried to get back, pushing everyone in their way. This meant that anyone standing between them and the train was jostled around, some fell to the ground and the screaming increased tenfold.

It was two full minutes of mad screaming and yelling and shoving and deatheaters looking dumbfounded and trying to get some control of the situation. Two minutes and the ghouls decided that all the jostling of their coach was scary, plus the mad screaming form the vampires was upsetting (everyone with warm blood would agree on that matter). They ripped the doors open and made a run for it, scared and confused, losing themselves around Hogsmeade. In ten minutes they would forget what they were doing there or what had scared them, but the fright would remain so they would keep looking for a nice dark cellar where they could hide only to find another ghoul there and getting scared…

(The ghoul situation wouldn’t be resolved until May).

The ghouls were lost and they could barely pay any attention to them because the vampires were still yelling and crying and trying to climb over each other and not really succeeding in going back into the train. Selwyn kept looking at the sky, cloudy and with barely any light. It made no sense, it couldn’t the sun upsetting them so.

Some of the vampires were trying to fly away, but the panic had seized the group. Whenever anyone managed to rise even a little bit, a dozen hands shot after them hoping to hand on them and be pulled away and only succeeding in pushing them down.

“Excuse me, coming through, excuse me, I am so sorry, excuse me.”

Harry, Hermione and Draco climbed down the window of their carriage and got in the platform while about six vampires immediately tried to climb inside. They had never seen so many mouths with sharp fangs.

It was absolute mayhem. The vampires were running over each other like rats fleeing from a fire. Because they kept trying to get on top of each other, to be the first to climb back to the train, they were only succeeding in pushing each other back to the platform. The ones who had gotten back, or never got down, were mad with fear and were fighting to keep their spots by kicking anyone coming in.

It was stupid and dreadful. There were some humans trying to regain control of the situation and achieving nothing. Harry couldn’t even hear what they were saying over the commotion and when he asked Draco and Hermione much later they would have very confusing versions. One had seen blood spurting upwards and a few vampires with their eyes going red. The other saw sparks and remembered a burnt smell. All Harry remembered was the noise rising so much that he stopped hearing anything as he grabbed Hermione and Draco’s hands and together they got away from the platform.

Ten minutes later Harry, Hermione and Draco were standing alone in a deserted platform. The train with his shrieking occupants had left the station and was probably looking for a safe place to stop. There were five vampires dead in the ground with burn marks in their foreheads as if someone had pressed a spell to their heads. There was also a woman, short and ugly and dressed in the furs of the inhabitants of the mountains, with her throat slashed open. There many footprints in the blood around her.

It was just them, three young wizards (or two wizards and a witch), five dead vampires, a dead
woman and, at the end of the platform, a deatheater with two acolytes burning a sixth vampire. They could still hear the screaming over the roar of the locomotive.

Hermione was looking down, at the floor, and toeing at the tiling with her shoe. She crouched and got back up, holding something almost invisible in her hand.

Harry and Draco had moved a bit farther in. Draco had some dry cherry leaves in his hand and a bit of vampire blood that had fallen over his coat as they got more violent trying to get in. “Major stupefy” he said, although there was no such thing as different levels of that spell. There were now, because the three deatheaters rocked back and looked dizzy.

Harry stood behind them holding an empty bottle of pumpkin juice they had been given in Carlisle while they waited. He looked at the deatheaters and the bottle and did something, an arch like movement with his arm, that was all Draco got because Harry was annoying like that, doing wonderful things when people weren’t looking.

The three deatheaters were now, somehow, inside the pumpkin juice bottle. Draco saw them touch with confusion the glass walls of the bottle. Harry shook the bottle a bit and from the mouth fell three magic wands of average size that fell to the floor.

He had to go and kiss Harry, slow and tender and with so much affection that it felt like putting on a coat, you see why he had to do it.

“Cat hair” said Hermione still from the middle pf the platform. “It is all cat hair. I have never seen so much in my life and Crookshanks sheds a lot.”

“You know Marcus, that was the one with the fake mole on the cheek” called Harry, still holding a bottle with three deatheaters inside, still between Draco’s arms. “Marcus told me that cats give them something like rashes.”

Hermione drop the cat hair she had taken as a sample and walked towards them. When she got to the dead woman in the platform she stopped and crouched and closed the witch’s eyes with her left arm. She used her left hand a lot lately, since she got the ugly scar.

She didn’t know that when the hag was alive she would have had Hermione quartered without hesitation. Or maybe she guessed it but did it anyway because Hermione was like that. She cared a lot about what was right even when people didn’t deserve it.

The mountain witch had her eyes closed now but there was nothing to do for the mouth that hanged open in broken surprise, or the throat slashed open,

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“Oh, this is fantastic” said Draco, his voice elevating with joy as if haloed angels had come to take it up. “We are appropriating their symbols of distinction and fear and using their very own tools of oppression against them.”

“Robes. We are putting on deatheater robes.”

“That’s what I said.”

“A disguise so we can get to Hogwarts.”

“A cruel irony that their downfall will come dressed in the trappings of their own discourse.”
Harry stared, accepted that this was his life and kissed Draco quickly on the corner of the mouth. He put on the mask, which was awfully uncomfortable with his glasses.

Hermione had already gotten his robe on and she had adjusted the hem so she wouldn’t step on it. She put her hands on her hips. Hermione had wide hips, excellent for putting her hands in them and expressing emotions.

She sighed, but she was enjoying this too, Harry could tell. She paused briefly, making sure that Harry was looking at her. “Aren’t you a little short for a deatheater?”

“Oh my god Hermione you are the best person in the whole world.”

“Was that another amusing muggle reference?”

“Yes.”

Draco nodded and put on his mask. “Good. Good, good. Re-appropriation of symbolism. Excellent.”

***

“I feel like we should have a plan” said Harry as they left Hogsmeade behind and took the path to Hogwarts. The path was muddy and full of tracks so they were walking on the edge, the dew wetting the hem of their robes and their shoes. “It would be nice, to have a plan for once.”

“We have to take the Hogwarts’ horcrux before he gets to it” said Draco, who was daintily holding the front of his robes up.

“If we can also take down the snake, all the better” added Hermione. It had been a struggle to get all her hair inside the hood. The masks were usually tied to the back of the head with a ribbon, but this time they had had to tie the mask over the hood to get everything in place. It looked as if Hermione were a new deatheater who had overslept. It also look like any minute the ribbon would snap and all her hair would come out like a jack in the box.

“I can delay him” said Harry. His mask sat awkwardly over his face. They were not designed with people with glasses in mind. Draco said many wizards needed glasses, even pureblooded ones. Percy Weasley and Albus Dumbledore came to mind, so it was quite silly that they didn’t have glasses-users in mind.

“Horcrux or not, if we set him on fire that should stop him for a while” mused Draco who looked very elegant. He was also carrying a mug with tea because he liked starting the day with breakfast so of course he had made them detour to The Three Broomsticks and get some breakfast to go.

Nobody had questioned him. He wore the deatheater robes really well.

They arrived to the gates of Hogwarts at around half past seven. They saw the iron gates wide open, the sight that Harry had envied and wished for years. But everything looked distorted, like in a dream born from a fever. The castle had its windows broken, there were ornate pieces of stone in the ground and a dozen giants lying dead. There were big puddles of blood everywhere, on the floor, on the stairs, on the wall under the windows and on the roof of one of the turrets. There was a strong smell of metal and ashes and hot stone.

“I am going to check the Slytherin common room for anything looking like a horcrux. If there is nothing, I will make my way up from there” said Draco putting the empty mug down. “If any of you get hurt in my absence I will be extremely displeased.”
“I can see the snake.”

“Don’t get close to the snake” Harry and Draco said almost in unison.

“I can also see Bellatrix.”

“… Just make sure that not many people get killed” Said Draco firmly. Hermione’s protegos were really good. There was no need to have her any closer to danger.

There was Bellatrix, the snake, may other deatheaters that were still dangerous even if they weren’t Bellatrix, and Voldemort himself with his wand in his hand and his head thrown back.

“I know what he is doing” Harry sounded different, old and young at the same time. “He is putting a curse on the castle. A slow, old, one.” He glanced at them quickly. “Pretty sure I can interfere. Be careful everyone.” He kissed Draco and hugged Hermione before walking away and joining the small circle of deatheaters that were guarding Voldemort.

***

Hogwarts was known because of its complex layout. The corridors that weren’t always open, the moving stairs, the doors disguised behind paintings and statues. It was a place made of secrets and hiding spots and it was hopeless to pretend to find anything in there. Especially when there was only a vague description of what it was.

Still Draco was confident that he could do it in a relatively quick manner. He understood Voldemort’s thinking by now, his fake depth and shallow understanding of history. He went directly to the Slytherin common room and although the horcrux wasn’t there nor had it ever been, it was a very good guess none the less.

Draco realized quickly that nothing in Slytherin was the horcrux. He also saw a poster with his own portrait and the pieces of his wand behind a showcase, which he could honestly say was about the last thing he expected to find there.

He was very confused by it, but since he had been with Harry for a year and half he had grown a certain resilience to confusion. He didn’t dwell on it and let the thought parked for later. He had a horcrux to find and a few possible places lined up.

On his way out he came across Mister Parkinson. He obviously didn’t recognize Draco because he asked him if he had seen Pansy. He used a tone that… Well, Draco didn’t like that tone, not one bit, so he stupefied him and let him in the floor of the common room.

It took him quite a long time to get out of the dungeons and into the upper levels. He had to use two secret tunnels and vanish and re-erect some wards. (If asked, he couldn’t tell how he had learned to do that, maybe Harry was rubbing against him in more than one way).

(hehe, rubbing).

Through all this, he didn’t come across anyone. He could hear the sound of a battle going on but other than some werewolves in the distance and the odd deatheater he didn’t see anyone. This was good because staying near deatheaters was very risky if he was recognized, and going towards Hogwarts’ defendants was equally risky if he wasn’t recognized in time. Being alone suited him but it was strange all the same.

It was just his luck that he was unknowingly following the Lestrange path. But he discovered that the horcrux wasn’t in the mirrors room (Harry told him about that) or the cave pool (all Slytherins knew
about it, but not the others).

At some point he found Silas Carrow who, Draco knew, was a terrible person, the kind other deatheaters hesitated to invite to their parties and never when there were children in the house. Draco took a clipping of vampire fingernails (acquired that very morning) and a bit of walnut bark and with them he casted an *expelliarmus* so strong that Silas Carrow fell to the floor and broke his hip.

Draco let him there, fallen and wandless. He hoped that his cries for help would distract a deatheater from a more useful task. Although Silas Carrow’s reputation was such that the opposite was also possible and no one would come to help.

***

It was an hour before lunch and Draco was already feeling a bit hungry. He had finally found something useful in the form of a portrait of an old Slytherin Headmaster who knew about the horcrux. He was a bit confused about it however and the choir of milkmaids on the next painting didn’t help matters, nor did the ogress on the left.

“So you say it was destroyed? That’s very good.”

Draco, like his father before him, cut a very beautiful figure. He had just the right kind of shoulders and waist for that type of clothes. The formal robes hug his back like nymph in love with the sun god. He looked tall (although he was not) and elegant and the way he was holding the deatheater mask on the crook of his left arm was simply charming. He looked like the hero does in those period novels, the ones about the gallant captain coming from the colonies to seduce the spirited brunette heroine. He looked just like deatheaters wanted to look, white and pureblooded and well-bred, the picture of class and elegance, the definition of manners.

He looked like an idea, an idea of the man he could have grown up to be, back when everybody though that the angry boy who broke his wand and went away had ended up dead.

This is to explain why, upon going to check the room that the giggling milkmaids had pointed to him, absolutely no one recognized him. They only saw a handsome deatheater asking about a horcrux.

“Well?” prompted Draco and he was just as impatient as when he was explaining about the unfairness of the point system. That was it, that was him, the lost Slytherin prince returned and demanding answers.

***

The window was broken so Draco didn’t have to open it to get his head out. Someone had swept all the glass shards to a corner.

“What’s that charm to make your voice loud? Does anyone know?”

There were quite a few stares before a Ravenclaw rose his hand. They just can’t help it, Ravenclaws. “*Sonorus*” he said.

“Excellent, thank you.” Said Draco, who didn’t let a future-deciding crucial battle stop him from showing his manners. “Oh, and the movement?”

“I could just cast it for you, if you want.”
“Certainly, that could also work.” Draco lifted his chin to expose his throat. “THANK YOU SO MUCH, OH, I SEE THIS IS ON.”

The spell had indeed been casted.

“POTTER, THEY SAY THEY ALREADY FOUND THE HOGWARTS HORCRUX, GET THIS, IT WAS LONGBOTTOM!”

In the distance they could hear a faint voice yell back “what?”

“THE HORCRUX”

“what did they do?”

“THEY DESTROYED THE HORCRUX!”

“did they destroy it?”

“FOR MERLIN’S SAKE! YES. IT IS GONE.”

“good!”

“YES I THOUGHT SO TOO.”

“i am actually hermione!” said the faint voice. “i will pass the message along.”

“YOU DO THAT, I WILL STAY HERE AND HOLD THE FORT. FINITE INCANtatem.”

***

To say that Voldemort wasn’t happy with the situation was a bit of an understatement. He had his private affairs aired for everyone to hear (and in such a nonchalant way), affairs that no one was supposed to know about and that he had taken extreme pains to conceal. They also said that they had destroyed a horcrux, a piece of him! Those maggots had taken his horcrux and broken it.

Tom Riddle was one of the most powerful legilimens in history. Not the most, that honour belonged to a goat shepherdess in Northern Africa who in the 6th century used her power to keep track of everyone’s cattle and protect her village, but he was certainly one of the top five most powerful legilimens in history and he was most likely the most powerful alive.

This time the curse was different. This time he forgone the secrets he had learned in his trips and in the books stolen from the Forbidden Section and from the hot mouths of wizards who were worst than him but lacked his talent and ambition. He abandoned all that and searched inside, in his power and his instincts, and put a curse in the castle with the same potency and endurance as the one he had casted over the intangible DADA teaching position.

This time it wasn’t spiders and scorpions with shiny black shells, no blood coming from the walls boiling hot, no furious nightmare yelling at them, no storm forming outside with a thunderbolt that would break the castle in two.

No, this time it was him, just him and his sweet gentle voice that was like autumn leaves dragging over the stone, him and his perverted angry thoughts that felt like a dagger made of tar, something sharp and cutting that turned into poison extending over the flesh and burning it.

It was Voldemort getting on everyone’s minds, sinking his teeth and his claws.
The feeling of Voldemort getting inside your mind was impossible to describe. It was similar to a hand on a hip, to suddenly having a naked back and feeling a hot breath there and not knowing whether it would be followed with a bite or a kiss. It was an unwanted caress and being vulnerable and being the only one naked and spread open in a room full of clothed people.

That was just from his touch. It was followed by words dressed in emotions. The certainty that they would end up dead, the despair of knowing that no one would even remember their names, the futility of the pain and blood and sweat covering their bodies because they would all fail, Voldemort would win and there was nothing that could be done about it.

Out of the whole castle there was only one mind that escaped the attack. Percy had seen Voldemort’s curse over ten thousand times, he had seen even worse things that it hadn’t occurred to him yet, he had seen it all and he had despaired and then he had said “hell, no” and worked to put a stop to it. It was nothing knew so he kept walking along, searching for Neville. He had Lee Jordan with him, his head held firmly in the crook of Percy’s elbow. He wasn’t sure why, only that Lee had proved less than cooperative and Percy had been too tired to explain and simply plucked him away from the tower where he was going to die.

The others all felt Voldemort’s message, they felt the naked back and the hot breath and the stare and the hot whisper in the ear. If this had been about power, like Voldemort thought, if this had been about Severus building his own army and deposing the king to become an emperor, then it might had worked.

But every single person was there because they wanted to stop Voldemort, because they wanted to stop the war and make a better future. Every single person there had come knowing that they might die, all of them. They had had the chance to leave or they could not have come at all. Every single person in Hogwarts was willing to make a sacrifice and when Voldemort spoke to them and told them that their deaths would achieve nothing, well… that just made them angry and all the more willing to do something so big that everyone would damn sure remember.

Something like…

“The snake is a horcrux” Draco said to the room in general. It seemed to be working as an improvised sort of holding cell if the chained people in the corner were any indication. “Probably the last one. I’m going down to help Granger kill it.”

Voldemort’s curse had created a big ball of worry in Draco’s stomach, mostly worry about Harry standing down there. He was used to carrying a similar ball of fear and apprehension, however, and it turned lighter the moment he uttered those words.

***

Hermione had spent the morning casting protego and quietly luring Nagini away. Killing Nagini would be hard enough. She knew, she had faced that snake before. It would be impossible if she stayed under Voldemort’s feet.

But fortunately Voldemort hadn’t minded if the snake sidled away to eat a student or two. It was only now, as his secret was exposed, that for the first time he felt anxiety over Nagini.

Hermione divided her attention between him, the snake, and everything else because the grounds were utter chaos. Only one wizard remained from Voldemort’s small retinue and she knew who that wizard was. The other five had spread over the grounds of the castle.

Voldemort’s curses were terrible. She had stayed outside and yet she had seen enough to get an
accurate idea of the damage they could cause. Harry had been diverting most of the power and later she had learned that Bill and Fleur were also working on them. But they were in the small area of the almost, the barely, the just about. One moment of fatigue, one movement too slow, and Voldemort’s curse would get a good hold in the castle and they would be lost.

There weren’t many rules for this kind of curses. One was Don’t Touch It. Another was Disrupt The Caster, which is why Voldemort had initially kept five (later six) wizards around him so he wouldn’t have to spare any attention in suicide attacks against him.

He was right. At some point Bill Weasley himself had come outside cursing (the kind with dirty words, not the one that turned your bones into jelly) and tried to make a ruckus big enough to stop Voldemort from rising a killing wind, the kind he had used in the Ministry that would shave your flesh from your bones.

Bill hadn’t gone much further outside before being sent back but his plan remained and soon half the Gryffindor Quidditch team swept over them. The twins cackling as they let out some fireworks.

(In the background Percy Weasley could be heard yelling incoherently.)

The killing wind didn’t raise and the wizards guarding Voldemort were spread all over the grounds. Hermione made sure that they didn’t go back to their master while she searched for the snake.

The twins kept making sweeps and dropping anything on hand, including an empty teapot. Percy let out a very colourful and nonsensical exclamation when a *diffindo* curse came near George and grazed his ear. It was nothing. All head wounds bled a lot and looked more than what it is. If anything he was just missing a little bit of the top.

But she couldn’t find Nagini, that was eating Hermione, she had been good and stayed behind rather than shadowing Bellatrix and now she couldn’t see the snake.

She hexed Goyle Father with such strength that he went flying into the lake, but it felt like nothing because she couldn’t find the last horcrux.

***

Here is the thing about Nagini, she was not a snake anymore. Back when Voldemort was in Albania surviving as little more than a thought, he used to posses snakes and mice to get some corporeal form but it hardly lasted as they were too weak to hold him for a long time. Nagini had been different from the moment he saw her, stronger and smarter, and Voldemort had had his body back when he got her. She was a strong girl and he had rewarded her killer instinct by giving her a piece of his soul. He had made her practically immortal, immune to time and all diseases, but she had stopped being herself. Very little remained of what used to be a snake and she was now little more than Voldemort’s will and rage.

Draco had told them to kill her and by Merlin and Morgana, that’s what they were going to do.

They could see Hermione now. Once you knew it was her it seemed evident and it was ridiculous that they hadn’t noticed before. Her hood was bulging, her mask sat awkwardly on her face (most death eaters had removed it after their dramatic arrival because it was an encumbrance fighting) there was something just very Hermione-like in the way she moved.

She had set George Bullstrode on fire.

This she was doing in order to get Nagini’s attention. The snake, however, wasn’t looking at her. Hermione was too far away and there were enough death eaters near her that Nagini didn’t consider
her an urgent threat. She hated Hermione, Nagini did, brilliant muggleborn, Nagini hated her existence. But Nagini lived for Voldemort because she was Voldemort, she was his more primal instincts so she would do as he wished. Or rather, she would do only as he felt.

If Severus knew about this he would have gotten down to the grounds immediately because he was quite certain that Voldemort would sic the snake on him. However he had spent the morning quite busy getting the aconite for the werewolves, delivering essential supplies to the infirmary, witnessing Lucius death, duelling Travers and reminding everyone that Severus used to invent and rediscovered duelling spells when he was a teenager (oh, there was something so furiously nice about sectusempra). He also casted the curse on Theodore Nott Senior weakening him enough to allow his later capture.

Percy had said that the snake would kill him, but Severus didn’t mind it terribly if it meant that she would be close enough for someone else to kill her in turn.

He wasn’t the only one to reach this conclusion. Sacrifice your own life so someone can destroy the last remaining horcrux. It was more hopeful than if it had to be done with horcrux number three and there was a bunch of people willing to do it hastily descending to the main floor.

It took them a long while to fight their way outside through the few remaining trolls and the knee-deep water. Well, mostly water. Dirty water.

Blood, it was blood, but not from people they knew, most of it not. It was just the remains of one of Voldemort’s curses, pooled down to the lower levels and mized with some water. It wasn’t much more than an inconvenience, really.

Justin Finch-Fletchley and Hannah Abbot took a small detour to the kitchens to check on the house-elves. They needn’t have worried, however. At the first sign of trouble they had closed the kitchen doors and no amount of wizard magic could open something closed by a house-elf, not in less than a week time. They weren’t even locked in properly since they could apparate from the kitchen to wherever they wanted in the castle. They had simply locked out everyone else.

It was said that they had started making sandwiches for lunch. Hannah had bag.

There was an intense feeling of hopefulness at the sight of the bag.

They waded through the dirty water and climbed up the dead giant and down the other side, to the grounds of Hogwarts. Nobody ever spoke of them but those grounds were easily the favourite feature of every student. Despite living and studying in a castle, they all loved those grounds because they were children and children like the sight of deep green grass. They like the smell after it has been cut or after the rain, they like sitting on it and lying on it, they like running on it and playing and laughing.

It was theirs more than any other feature of the castle. It was theirs and it was stained with blood, burned in a few points, trodden and muddied and covered with the bodies of giants, a few broken harpies, the occasional trolls and something metallic that turned out to be the remains of the armours McGonagall had animated hours ago.

The spot where Voldemort stood was a bit elevated and still green because he too had been in Hogwarts and liked its grass so he chose a nice place for himself. It looked like as if he were standing in the crest of a green wave, over the soaked ground and the fallen pieces of stone (pillars and gargoyles and animated statues), over the corpses he had put there.

He was up there, with one hand on his temple and the other extended in the air as he sent his hateful
curse of poisonous thoughts. He was there, his praetorian guard scattered, fleeing from the twins’
cackling attacks and from Hermione’s sharp wand. He was there and not too far was the snake.

“Oh, look at me” said Neville with a voice like a broom-polishing wax advertisement. “Young and
tender Longbottom!” He proclaimed cheerily,spanking himself lightly in the rear. “Standing here
with no wand.”

Neville’s ability to feel embarrassment had been stunted during his fifth year and stopped developing.
He jigged his namesake a little bit.

Bellatrix hated him with all her heart. She hated Neville and his family and she particularly wanted to
see them suffer.

(Or had wanted. She was dead, had been for almost an hour).

But no one hated Neville more than Voldemort himself. The kid that could had been. The
pureblooded one. If only he had gone and killed Neville he would never have lost his empire.
Voldemort hated Harry for bringing his downfall and he hated Neville because he chose wrong.

(As if Alice Longbottom wouldn’t have died protecting her son, as if she wouldn’t had put an
equally powerful protection on Neville).

Voldemort hated that pureblooded idiot, he despised his presence.

Nagini darted down.

She was surprisingly fast and her sinuous movement gave the impression that she was even faster. In
no time she was at the feet of the small hill, down where the grass had blood and there were pieces of
stone ripped by the firebirds or the giants’ attack. Down where there were dead giants and broken
statues and harpies and a big smelly ogre, all of them dead.

Three. Four.

Neville stepped back, past the harpy with only one arm.

Five. Six.

Hermione saw the snake moving but she was too far away. Bullstrode was still screaming and
ineffectually trying to douse the flames in his robes.

Seven. Eight.

Neville kept going back, trembling with fear. The snake moved in waves but her head was centred
and looking at him.

Nine…

Ten.

“Sectusempra” yelled Neville, who wasn’t wandless after all.

“CONFRIGO” said Dean Thomas and Hannah Abbot at once, jumping from behind the piece of
scaffolding where they had been hiding.

“Reducto” murmured Draco blowing gently on a handful of silver scales and some willow leaves.
The snake screamed and jumped and actually managed to evade the blast Ron had sent her way. But she had gone right to the lower terrain whereas everyone else (even Neville, who had jumped on top of a broken capital with volutes) was on higher ground. It was a snake with deadly poison and fangs and Voldemort’s magic protecting her, but there were eight young angry wizards and witches who after feeling Voldemort’s curse of despair had wanted to get a shot at eternal fame.

They casted from so many places at once that Nagini wasn’t sure where to go next. She kept trying to go after Neville because he was the one she hated the most. She dodged some hits and she got closer. Twice she almost bit Neville.

Dean casted a conjunctivitis curse, just because. Hannha Abbot broke a few bones, although that is hard to see in a snake. Neville, in a magnificent move, cut her tongue just as she was jumping over him with her jaws wide open. Ron got her with a blasting curse three times in a row.

Draco took some lavender and some silver (from a ring) and a handful of big splinters from a birch tree and made a thunderbolt big enough to make the snake jump in the air.

It wasn’t clear whether this was enough to kill her. Nagini was a horcrux after all and all the other horcruxes had been extremely difficult to destroy. And the thing with living horcruxes is that they have their own rules.

Eventually they saw some cuts appear on her.

Michael Corner made a small fire. Neville casted *reducto* again. The snake was moving slower now.

Ron jumped aside and casted a *protego* over all of them. They had made enough noise that a couple deatheaters had come their way. They had big purple marks on their faces and something yellow dripping from their shoulders. One had to admire their dedication if nothing else.

“*Confrigo*” said Hannah Abbot with gritted teeth. Her friend Susan was upstairs, alive, but awfully close to death and to this day nobody knew if she was the only survivor of her family or if someone else had made it.

They said Amelia Bones had been given to the snake after she was murdered, because the muggle-friendly didn’t deserve a burial.

Dean attacked the snake again, then it was Neville. Ron had turned around and was working on stopping the spells from the deatheaters. Hannah Abbot had broken formation and was running to meet them screaming bloody murder.

Hannah had dirty blonde hair and it was just slightly funny, the young blonde girl, too tall and too thin and with trousers that were unflattering in the rear, running towards them.

Seamus Finnigan poked his head out from behind the leg of a giant. He had a glass jar in one hand and his wand on the others. The Gryffindors and the ones who had shared a class with him ducked instinctively the moment he threw the jar in the air. Everyone did whenever Seamus made a brusque movement.

They didn’t know what was in the jar but they all heard him scream *bombarda maxima* with delight.

The explosion took Nagini, two dead harpies, a broken statue, a piece of pillar and made a hole in the ground at least two metres deep. There was mud and other things raining over them for a long while.

They were all close enough to be partially deafened so they missed the shriek as the horcrux itself
died.

“So this is why there aren’t any snakes in Ireland, isn’t it?” murmured Dean, throwing an arm over Seamus’ neck. That was a nice thought, by the way. Visiting Seamus’ hometown one day.

***

Since his return, Voldemort hadn’t looked so human as in this moment of fear and anger when Nagini was blown up right before his very own eyes. His mouth hung open halfway to a snarl, his eyes were open wide in surprise. When he roared, a bit of spit came flying from his mouth.

He took seven quick steps. The curse he had been casting completely abandoned. All his thoughts were on the horcrux he had lost and on punishing the culprits.

Seamus had jumped down on the crater to check that there was nothing horcrux-like behind. He was the one Voldemort could see best so he was the one he pointed at with his wand.

“Avada kedavra” he said, almost ripping Dean’s heart right then.

And nothing happened.

“AVADA KEDAVRA”.

No.

***

Because he had trouble paying attention people said that Harry was very impatient. This was not true. He could be patient. He had waited almost five years to get away from Hogwarts, he could wait a morning to get to Voldemort.

He stayed behind focusing in being unnoticed and disrupting his curses as much as he could. He was good. He didn’t bring attention to himself. He didn’t go running after Lucius Malfoy or Bellatrix Lestrange. He stayed where he was, small and quiet, and sung to himself to get the focus to move Voldemort’s hand.

Now was the time to move. Now he could take that uncomfortable mask and step forward.

Just like in his dream, that terrible dream from three years ago, Harry was standing before Voldemort, pale just as him and dressed in black silk robes just as him. His hair was long and loose, dancing behind his head like the tendrils of jellyfish. The scar of his chest hadn’t grown to reach the one in his forehead though and unlike in the dream Harry wasn’t his equal but a perfect inversion.

Voldemort’s wand shook in his hands and coughed a few clouds of green dust and that was all. None of the avada kedavra he had casted. By then Seamus had crawled away, sensible enough to get away from the range of the wand before stopping to marvel at what was happening. Voldemort raised his arm and shook his wand again and saw with terrified stupor as it started to collapse before his very eyes, the wood splintering and falling, uncovering the golden accents of the phoenix feather inside.

Harry had his wand in his hands, too, both of his hands. It seemed stupid and completely illogical but he had been with Draco long enough, and he had been with himself and his weird brand of magic longer still, enough to trust his instincts when they told him to get his wand, that wand that was a twin to Voldemort’s, and break it in two.
Hollywood was best for protection and the phoenix feather was a raw power hard to tame. They rarely went well together but they had been in this wand and they had answered to Harry and they were answering now, their power swirling around Harry’s hands, as he focused on the idea of making Voldemort stop.

The white-bone wand of Voldemort was nothing more than a small pile of dust on the floor. The phoenix feather in Harry’s hand disappeared with Voldemort’s wand, but he still had the good old holly, just like the one he had had in his childhood home. Harry used to sit under that tree to read and he had been very happy. It was with the memory of that happiness that he looked at Voldemort and he slowly but surely started to turn him into stone.

No more death, no more hate, only unfeeling stone.

Voldemort’s flesh began to harden and turn grey, the blood was thickening and slowing. It didn’t extend uniformly. Harry was still very innocent in many aspects. It didn’t occur to him that Voldemort, Tom Riddle, might have a cock or a stomach like a normal human being. The stone set first on the arms and the hands that once held that murderous wand, and on the throat and the mouth that had spoken so many words of death.

Voldemort’s tongue was now pure stone and it sat heavily on his mouth. It was a feeling of sudden vulnerability that scared him just as much as the first time he made a horcrux. He could not speak. He thought he could not breath.

Even the robe draped over his body was petrifying. The elegant folds hardening and holding him in place. The stone had taken over his arms and half of his face and it was descending down his chest, spreading more slowly over his back. He still had control over his shoulders, barely, and his legs.

Voldemort was turning to stone and the rictus in his face was one of pure terror. Harry felt his heart shrink in sympathy, such fear was etched in Voldemort’s face.

***

So many people knew Harry Potter. Olivia, his first friend, knew his imagination for playing pretend games. Remus knew his fears and his likes and his thinking. Severus knew the traits he had inherited from his parents and the ones that were his own, plus his intellect and his preferences in books. Hermione knew when he was making his mind about something. Draco knew that Harry wondered at the name of constellations and the number of petals in flowers and modern routes of spices (where did cinnamon grow nowadays?). Draco knew an intimate part of Harry nobody else would get to see.

But if someone knew Harry, actually knew him and knew him well, that was Ron Weasley. He may not have known Harry as a little kid and he certainly hadn’t kissed him, but he knew him in a complete way. Or rather, it is not that Ron Weasley knew Harry better, but that he understood him better than anyone.

So Ron knew that Harry was in trouble perhaps before Harry himself. Ron knew. Ron had seen Harry being angry and depressed and joyful and annoying and through all that he had seen him being kind. He had seen (and occasionally helped), Harry freeing animals in class and petting all of them. Harry let a freaking Basilisk live and when he confessed to Ron he had looked so adamant and so crushed that Ron couldn’t even get angry with him and promised that he would keep giving the Basilisk the choir schedule after Harry was gone.

Harry, Ron knew, could not kill Voldemort.
Harry could not kill anything or anyone.

The only reason Harry still ate meat and fish was because he figured many animals also ate animals, as demonstrated by his childhood friend Mrs. K who ate frogs and mice and had to be careful of owls and other birds.

Mrs. K was a snake, something that Harry only mentioned when the summer of their fourth year he started to chat with another snake that was hiding in the garden of the Burrow. Apparently he (as this was a male snake) was hoping to catch a gnome or two.

Harry was winning, or had been winning until a minute ago. Voldemort was disarmed and part of him was turning to stone. But Harry wasn’t going for the kill because that was just Harry and he couldn’t, he couldn’t, not even for someone as evil as him. Even if he understood that killing Voldemort would be a good thing for everyone, he just could not do it.

Then again, what are friends for if not for murdering someone so you don’t have to? Harry had saved his sister’s live, and Hermione’s. Harry protected the most important women in Ron’s life.

Harry was an only child and as it is often the case with only children he was gentle and unaccustomed to fighting, first year in Hogwarts non-withstanding. Ron, on the other hand, was the youngest in a very big family. Technically Ginny was the youngest but as the only girl they usually picked on her less, plus she used to be a biter. Ron was used to fighting, is the point. You always are when you have siblings.

There was a sword lying around. It might had been a sword from one of the enchanted armours or it might be the sword of Gryffindor himself. It might had been a sword embedded in the stone for centuries and only now, with the clash of battle, the vines and weeds growing around it had parted revealing the pommel. Ron really didn’t pay any heed to that. He simply closed his hand around the hilt and drew the sword with him.

Voldemort was fighting back. Voldemort, for all his hideous features and ridiculous ideas, was a very powerful wizard. He had cut through the remaining protective wards in the castle as one would wave aside a spider net. He could do things no one had told them about.

Ron tiptoed carefully around the melted remains of some of the armours McGonagall had animated. They had charged at Voldemort bravely but they hadn’t even gotten close to him before they started to fall as if they were made of butter.

They had still been animated as they liquefied. Not alive. They moved and acted and maybe even thought a little so they could fight but they were not alive. Yet Voldemort had kept whatever spark of life was in them as they melted and… died. That was him. Killing even what was not alive. Making them suffer anyway.

Ron didn’t make any noise as he went through them.

For a while it had seemed as if Voldemort had turned to stone. Or rather, Harry had turned him to stone, grey and a bit porous. But now there was no doubt he was made of flesh and bone (Ron was not so sure about the blood) and his robes were made of fabric. He was locked in place, petrified in a different sense, but he had fought the actual stone that took over his body and he was fighting this too. Harry was standing there, barely three steps away, focused on keeping him locked and trying to bring the stone back, trying to simply get Voldemort not to move so he would not be able to do any more harm.

There had been a moment when Voldemort looked made of stone and Harry should had struck then,
crumble the stone into dust and rid them forever of this monster. But he didn’t because this was Harry. Instead, Harry tried to literally stop Voldemort and lock him inside something rather than dealing a killing blow.

Ron had grown with different stories from those of the muggleborn. Not better or worse, just different. There were quite a few of them about monsters. Trolls and vampires and wicked spirits and malicious genies, who were all locked behind walls of stone and inside bottles thrown to the sea and in dark deep caves and abandoned wells who later were covered with an iron grate. What the stories had in common was that it was never enough. All those monsters were locked somewhere and they always returned. The rain moved the ground under the stone, the fish ate the bottle that was later found by the cook, the maid heard a voice coming from the well and being curious she removed the grate… They always came back. They were evil and evil rarely stops. Bad people might change and redeem themselves, but not the evil ones.

Voldemort had now managed to twist his head and one arm towards Harry. His face was locked in a snarl, his torso turning slowly. If he were locked inside a statue or a tree or a well he would still come back, eventually he would come back and he would attack Ron’s best friend.

Maybe even earlier than that. Voldemort’s hand was like a claw slowly moving to Harry’s face. Any second now he would shake the charm completely and he would fall over Harry and they had seen, they had all seen the things Voldemort could do. Ron had no doubt that Voldemort, like Harry, like Grindewald, could do terrible things without a wand.

So, you see, it was easy. There was some physical effort but not too much and overall Ron had expected needing to apply more strength and possibly more blows. One was enough, however. One single thrust of the sword through the back and out of the chest in the general area where the heart and other important bits ought to be.

It turned out that Voldemort was still made of common human blood, dark red, that spurted from both ends and covered Ron’s arms and hands and even a bit of his face. This wouldn’t have happened with avada kedavra but it didn’t seem right to use that curse. Avada kedavra didn’t so much kill you as it deleted you. It was too effortless and too easy and too clean whereas Ron was now appropriately dirty and he had had to make some effort even if it still seemed too small for taking someone’s life.

He should have drawn the sword back. It didn’t occur to him until later. Seeing that Voldemort was dead Ron simply let go of it and watched in shock as the Most Dangerous Wizard of the Century fell to the ground with the sword still sticking out of him.

And that was it.
Aftermath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he was ten Harry heard about Voldemort and imagined him being a bit like Emperor Palpatine and possibly falling off a mountain if he wasn’t able to turn good. And then there would be cake.

Voldemort didn’t look like Palpatine and his corpse was still lying where it had fallen, sword sticking out of him and surrounded by the remains of some armours. There wasn’t any cake.

***

Severus hugged Harry for fifteen straight minutes. He felt dizzy with relief and joy. Harry was alive and he was well and the monster was dead. There was no one who wanted to hurt him, no one who wanted to kill him or lure him into getting killed. They were all dead and Harry was alive, with his tangled hair and his smile.

Severus hugged Harry tight and closed his eyes. Then he took Harry by the shoulders, stepped back, and looked him all over, like parents do, quickly checking that there was no sudden subtraction or addition of limbs and other body parts.

But he was fine. Taller than he had been, a bit thinner. Not even scratches or blood stains when everyone in the castle had some.

“These glasses are too small” Severus said as he took Harry’s glasses and examined them. The frames had the paint chipped and there were scratches all over them. He tapped them with this wand to clean the dirt and dust from the lenses.

“Come Monday, I’m taking you to get a new pair.” He told Harry. They were too old and too small for his face anyway.

Harry grinned. As much as Harry was loved by extraordinary people, they were determined to give him an ordinary life. This included tsking over the state of his glasses.

They hugged some more and then they went on their way. There was much to do and he knew, they knew, that no one was going to interfere in their lives ever again.

***

The sun was attempting to break through the little clouds. The castle was oddly warm and everybody was thirsty and tired and a bit cranky. The idea of cleaning up after the battle was a punishment.

Harry went down to the kitchens and got a big bag full of glass bowls. Dobby cried with happiness when he saw him. Kreacher made a point of looking stern and unimpressed but he tried to push Dobby away and give the bag to Harry himself.

It was absurdly hot in the castle so Harry went around greeting people and passing bowls of ice-cream. He had been gone for a year and half and everybody was thirsty and quite tired, so no one stopped to question how exactly he was getting the ice-cream when the bowls in the bag were empty. They focused on greeting him instead.
Harry gave blackberry ice-cream to Bill, who was still looking very handsome. Fleur got raspberry and cream. Draco would get strawberry cheesecake but Harry had to put the bowl on the floor by his feet because he was busy being hugged by Sirius and there was a line of sniffling Slytherins waiting their turn. They all got ice-cream for the wait, green tea and lemon and butter pecan and tangerine. Sirius got an interesting mixture of pineapple, mango and papaya.

(And while they hugged Draco, they also moved him to a different area so he wouldn’t get to see his father’s corpse. It was not a pretty sight.)

He found Hermione on the fourth floor, near the Transfigurations corridor and McGonagall’s office. The corridor was full of debris and rubble, but the office itself was fine. Hermione was sitting on the floor by the door, crying and laughing at the same time. Harry gave her a bowl of orange and chocolate ice-cream with a cookie on top, the first he had gotten.

(Although Draco’s ice-cream had actual pieces of strawberry and cake crust in it).

Hermione waved her hand to acknowledge him but she didn’t say a word, she couldn’t, she had too many emotions choking her. Harry understood it, so he patted her lightly on the head and left her to it.

It was just a cat. It was just a cat but it was Hermione’s cat. Too often people will dismiss and play down the love for one’s pet, but that love is standing and big and solid. It was just a cat but Hermione hadn’t gotten the chance to say goodbye. You can’t explain to an animal that you didn’t abandon them, that you will return, that you think of them through the day. You are there and then you are not, and for the last year Hermione hadn’t been there. She had taken measures to prevent her parents from the grief of losing her, but there was nothing she could do for Crookshanks.

She stayed on the floor hugging the big orange ball of fury and fur. She buried her face on the fur and closed her eyes and rocked slightly and in that moment she did not have an angry ugly scar on her forearm and she had not been forced to kill anyone. She cried with relief and laughed with joy and ate her ice-cream while Crookshanks licked her chin.

***

Voldemort was dead and everything had come to a halt but there was still much to do. The infirmary remained open and working (there was an exhausted cheer when Madam Pomfrey declared Susan Bones out of danger). There were prisoners in a holding cell and the numbers were increasing as Kingsley made sure that the surviving attackers were arrested, he also had bowl of hazelnut ice-cream and he didn’t know how he had gotten it.

Tonks got vanilla. Harry wasn’t very surprised.

The faces turned into a blur as Harry went around the castle. He remembered giving something with caramel to Dean Thomas and him hugging Harry and laughing madly and kissing Harry because that was their joke now. He remembered seeing Luna and being oddly relieved that she was standing. (Her flavour was mango).

Lavender Brown looked very pale and was full of crisscrossing red lines. She was in bed, with her eyes closed. The bowl Harry left on her bedside was snow white and smelled of flowers. It did not melt even though it took hours for her to wake up.

The twins were sitting on the stairs with Lee Jordan between them. They were berating him for getting in danger even though George had one side of his face covered in blood. He got chocolate and cookies, George did. Fred had peaches, Lee pistachio. Harry wasn’t sure what the others had,
only that seeing Angelina Johnson alive was a gift.

***

Percy was incredibly tired. So, so tired. He was also eating a bowl of mint ice-cream, given to him by Harry Potter. He had been carrying quite a lot of ice-cream with him, Harry. But he knew somehow that mint was Percy’s favourite.

So tired. The idea of a remote island sounded so marvellous and so far away. He could not move.

Someone came to sit by his side. Percy saw first a bowl of brown ice-cream and then the handsome face of Oliver Wood.

“How you doing, Perce?”

“I am so tired.”

Oliver smiled. He had black soot and dried blood on his face, but his smile was wonderful like always.

“Well, I hear you have been very busy.”

“So busy.” Percy took another spoonful of his ice-cream. He was going to go to a place that also had ice-cream, he decided. Maybe Italy. Maybe further south. “I burn easily” he said.

“Ah.”

“I mean, sorry, I was thinking aloud. I want to go away but I get terrible sunburn, I can’t go to the beach.”

“You have very pale skin, that is true.” Oliver said, bumping his shoulder against Percy’s. Percy smiled and leaned a bit against Oliver for support. He was really tired and Oliver was all solid muscle. Plus it was Oliver, they used to share a room in Hogwarts. Oliver was really nice as long as you didn’t contradict him about Quidditch.

Percy took two more spoonfuls. There were chocolate chips on his ice-cream.

“What’s yours?” he said, pointing at Oliver’s bowl with his spoon. Somehow, this seemed like a very important question to ask. He was still leaning against Oliver.

“Coffee with chocolate beans.”

“Mine has chocolate too!” What a wonderful coincidence.

“Awesome.” Oliver extended the arm holding the bowl, his other arm coming to Percy’s back for support as he turned. “Do you want to try?”

Percy did. He took a spoonful of the coffee ice-cream and ate it slowly, closing his eyes and relishing the flavour as it melted on his mouth.

He opened his eyes, blinking.

Oliver was awfully close.

And then Oliver was kissing him and all Percy’s brain could manage was a panicked _____!!!!!!!!!!_____. Thank you so much, brain, you are no use.
Oliver leaned back, his eyes wandering over Percy’s face unsure of where to look, his eyes, his lips, maybe not his face at all. Percy felt himself blushing under that gaze.

The beautiful smile was gone.

“You didn’t…” Oliver said, and closed his mouth to swallow, but he went on because this was Oliver Wood, brave and nice and unafraid to admit his mistakes. “I thought, oh gosh, I am so sorry Perce. I though you would speak or stop me beforehand if you didn’t want it, because-”

“I… was not expecting this.” Percy said slowly as his brain seemed to reboot and finally get on the current time and place. His hands were cold from holding the bowl of ice-cream.

“But you are a seer, they say.”

“Doesn’t mean I can see every single thing that is going to happen. I certainly didn’t see this coming.”

“oh.”

They were back to how they had started. Not a hair more of space between them.

“I, um, I… I think I missed it.” Percy blinked quickly. It was just his luck. Beautiful Oliver with his beautiful smile and his stupid face gave him a kiss and Percy was too busy starting on his nervous breakdown to notice it. “You really took me by surprise, I didn’t even register it as it was happening.”

There was quite a lot of regret on Percy’s voice. Thankfully, despite the Hufflepuff drive and passion that moved Oliver Wood on any given day, he had quite a dose of Gryffindor courage.

“Would you like a repeat?” He said.

“Yes, please” answered Percy quickly. He would certainly like a repetition, slow if possible. He had his one kiss, he wanted to relish it.

“Okay, here I come. Three, two, one…”

This time, yes, this time Percy was in the moment and got to enjoy his very unexpected very nice kiss and neither of them finished their ice-creams but Percy was almost done anyway.

***

Severus was honestly surprised at having survived all of this. He also felt as if just now he could finally take a breath he had been holding perhaps since that spring day when he was lurking in the hedgerow and saw a toddler abandoned in the garden. Yes, he had been holding his breath since then and only now he saw that he had gotten away with it.

He was so tired, and he wasn’t finished, not yet. He had already hugged his son (was this the first time he let himself think of Harry that way? He had no idea) and he had buried his nose in his hair, because there is no smell like the one of your children. But now he also had to supervise that all the injured got treatment and that nothing dangerous remained loose, or at the very least find someone in which to delegate all those tasks. He was still Headmaster of Hogwarts, he couldn’t have trolls, ogres and firebirds wandering freely through the grounds.

He was pretty sure that if he tried to resign and drop the title on Minerva, she would kick him in the balls. Not even a hex or a curse, a plain old kick.
So he had two dozens tasks and somewhere on top was letting Remus know that they won and survived, hurray and confetti! Remus was free to come back with the kids. Also Harry was here and unharmed and he had grown although now that Severus saw him at a distance, dragging a dusty deatheater robe, he realized he was still the shortest of his year.

He could go get an owl and write a message and include proof that it was really him. But really, given the situation, sending a *patronus* was best. It was quicker and safer and there was no stairs involved.

It was just… a *patronus*.

He moved a bit away from the main group and then after looking at his surrounding he moved further out because in the last spot he had looked all dramatic and that had always attracted a teenager with a confession to make. Here by the shrubs was much better. The light was bad and he could cast his *patronus* unbothered and with no pesky questions.

“We won” he said “Voldemort is dead. Dead dead, not in unliving form. He left a corpse. Harry is here and is well. So is Draco, and the girl. Return at your convenience.”

That was it, really. But if felt like too little, just as when he sent him messages in those little post boxes and they always felt too little for what he wanted to say.

“I love you” he added at the end. That was it. Completely unnecessary, just as decorations are unnecessary, just like salt is unnecessary in food.

Merlin, it felt good to say it.

“Was that a lion?” asked Sirius Black, plague on the earth that he was. He was carrying a bottle of water and two sandwiches. He passed one of them to Severus and they shared the water.

“It was a bear” lied Severus, unwrapping his sandwich. The *patronus* still visible in the distance.

“A bear? Okay, I can say that, no worries” Sirius pushed Severus playfully with his shoulder. He had lost the leather jacket he had worn during the battle. If Severus looked back at the castle he had no doubts that he would spot Draco wearing it. Sirius’ eyes and nose were still red from all the crying he had done.

“But you know, if it were a lion it would fine too, more than fine.” Sirius went on, talking while he chewed. “Moody’s *patronus* is a badger, you tell me which one is better.”

***

Remus returned that evening with dozens of excitable children in tow. They had left with a backpack each with food and clothes so rather than a desperate escape for their lives, they had experienced something more like an educational outing. They had seen a very interesting creature (Mircilius) and picturesque places.

They also spoke of some vampires that fell over them and were in turn taken by the neck and slammed against a wall of rock. Then they camped outside, which was lots of fun, and they sang songs. They were only slightly disappointed that they didn’t get to meet Victor Krum.

Remus hugged Harry for fifteen minutes, his eyes closed as he lost himself in the smell of his son. After that he put his hands on Harry’s shoulders, gave a step back and examined him with a critical eye.
“You have lost weight. How have you been eating? You have also grown a lot. Look at you. We have to get you new clothes.”

Harry laughed when Remus said that he would take him shopping on Monday.

Later, Remus went and found Severus and they kissed for ten minutes not even caring that they were in a corridor. He would have liked to make love to him that night, but they had had a very long day and the one before had been longer still. They fell asleep in each other arms, still dressed and on top of the covers. They woke many times during the night still not believing that they had won, but each time they went back to sleep with a smile.

***

Harry found Ron sitting by himself outside the school, staring at nothing. There was still grime and blood under his fingernails and on his ears, but he had washed a bit. He had taken his sweater off (purple and maroon, so not his colours) and was sitting on top of it to avoid getting grass stains in his bum. If the sweater got some green in it, it would be no tragedy, perhaps an improvement.

Ron had grown as a young child in a big family. Not even the youngest which is a position of honour in a certain way and often featured prominently in fairy tales. No, he was the one just before, young but not the youngest. There were so many brilliant brothers before him that he knew he would never get to have an “-est” for him. Not the brightest or the funniest or the bravest.

Ron had gone through a process of acceptance in life. By the time he came to Hogwarts he had known and accepted that if he didn’t manage to do something magnificent and astonishing, he would be a bit of an embarrassment for the family. The runt, the one who did nothing remarkable. But even if he achieved a wonderful feat he would still be following the steps of his brothers and so it would not be something extraordinary. He could not win either way and he had accepted that.

By the time he was in his fourth year he had come to accept that his best friend, Harry Potter, was too much of a good person to resent him for all the attention he got and that Ron craved. During that year with the stupid trials Ron had come to accept that he would always be overshadowed by his brothers and friends. Talented Bill and Charlie and even Percy and his good grades, funny twins, clever Hermione, and lastly Harry who was very odd but still the Boy Who Lived. Ron was none of that and it was a bit like drinking black tea with no sugar, it wasn’t nice but he could take it and he could still care about all of them.

Ron had accepted a life of being the runt, the spare, the disappointment. Not even the black sheep of the family, not even that because Percy of all people beat him to it. Ron would be the grey dull brother, not so bad to be the outcast, not so good to be someone for himself. He had accepted it because at that moment making sure all the people he loved were safe was way more important than Ron’s sense of self-worth.

He had accepted it.

Perhaps this is not clear. He had accepted it. He was resigned to a lacklustre life, to becoming an insipid note in everyone else’s lives’ accounts. Ron Weasley, brother of the founders of Weasley Wizard Wheezes. Ron Weasley, older brother of record holder Quidditch player Ginevra Weasley. Ron Weasley, brother of William the curse-breaker and Charles the dragon-tamer. Ron Weasley, friend of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.

Never in his wildest dreams and fantasies in which he got all the recognition and awards, never, had Ron thought he would become Ron Weasley the One Who Slayed Voldemort.
You too would need a moment to stare at the treeline and the lake and let it sink in.

“I have ice-cream” said Harry. He looked around for a few seconds at a loss before dropping his bag on Ron’s lap and shrugging out the deatheater robe, folding it in two, and sitting on top of it next to Ron. Soon after, Ron was provided with a bowl of strawberry ice-cream. Excellent ice-cream. The kind that also has syrup and different textures and, in this case, three actual strawberries on top cut in a rose shape.

Harry did not have actual lemon slices in his ice-cream because that would be way too sour but after staring at the bowl for a while it transformed into a big hollowed out lemon, which was also very nice.

“This makes it better” said Ron after his second spoonful. Somehow the coldness and the sweetness was waking him up and bringing him back from the white limbo his mind had gone to.

“Always” Harry agreed.

It was very far from a summer day but it was warm enough with the hot castle at their backs. The sun had finally managed some uplifting shining, enough that they could stay there on their shirts, eating ice-cream and looking at the winter flowers. Two boys sitting in the green, two friends enjoying the small pleasures of life.

There wouldn’t be many photographs of the Battle of Hogwarts as everybody had been busy with something else. There would be more of the aftermath, of Kingsley looking all regal as he gave orders, of Severus organizing the clean-up, Hagrid with his sleeping flock of firebirds. But out of all of them, the one that would become iconic would be this one, taken by Colin Crevey. A photograph of The Boy Who Lived and the Boy Who Killed, sitting side by side in the grass and looking at the timid winter flowers. Both boys were giving their backs to the audience and while most magical photographs moved, this one would be one of the quietest. Just the wind gently caressing the top of the trees and their hair.

It was an image of peace.

Chapter End Notes

This is it. Thank you everyone for your patience and encouragement. I really appreciate it.
Interested in an epilogue? There is something in the works. Read below.

I have a few disconnected scenes for an epilogue. I love Advent Calendars and I would like to present the epilogue as one. However, I don’t have enough scenes for that. While I work in the scenes I do have sketched, I thought I could give the opportunity to drop me some prompts and see if I can get 24-25 total. If that is something that would interest you, you can drop me a line here or in the deserted and barren land of my tumblr here: https://llendrinall.tumblr.com/

EDIT: Prompts are closed and the Advent Calendar is posted.
Feedback is love!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!