Samsara

by Millarca

Summary

Because Tom Riddle and Lily Potter were brilliant. Harry James Potter wakes up on his eighth birthday knowing terrible, great love.

Notes

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“Watch what you’re doing, freak!”

The woman’s voice is shrill, echoes jarringly inside the pristine kitchen, angry, always angry. Harry flinches and hides his bleeding hand behind his back, fingers curled tight and flesh throbbing. The knife lies flat on the cutting board, metal wet with fresh blood and celery residue.

“I’m sorry, aunt Petunia.” It is pure reflex that moves his mouth, forms the words that never quite manage to placate her.

His aunt doesn’t care to hear excuses or reasons, at least not from him. Dudley, on the other hand, can get away with anything if he scrunches up his face and whines long and loud enough. A sniff and an upturn of her nose is all Harry merits, and shrieked orders.

“Wipe off that mess. I don’t want your dirty blood all over my clean kitchen. God forbid it gets into the food… My poor Dudley could get poisoned or—or worse!” She clutches the coral silk of her blouse with one hand above her heart, as if the thought of such mishap is more foul than the blackest murder. Her eyes fall down on him, narrow with ill-concealed distaste, pupils blown wide. “But take care of that cut first. Who knows what’s in your freakish blood… Abnormal, the whole lot of you.”

Harry ducks his head and clenches his fist. Blood spills on the white-gleaming tiles, and her nostrils flare.

“Yes, aunt Petunia.” He says nothing more and does as he is told—but he is smiling through the pain.

His hand hurts. His head hurts. His mouth hurts. He keeps smiling. Passive-aggression is his dead mother’s milk.

It begins with blood, the way all things begin. Blood, pain, something wounded and trapped and screaming for never-given mercy. Deep inside. Close to the surface. A scar upon a soul that can neither close nor open. The Curse and the Vessel. Wrong, unnatural, damned to live between agony and oblivion—and still, wanting to live.

“Get in there, boy! And don’t you make any noise or it will be the belt for you.”

His uncle’s grip on his arm is brutal as he drags him into the cupboard that has been his for as long as Harry can remember. Bones rattle under blotched skin, grinding, nerves blazing excruciatingly. Sensation overpowers sense, and he snarls against the man’s violence, but the door is slamming shut and Vernon’s monologue mutes out the guttural cry.

“Why we took you in, I’ll never know. Eating our food and spitting on our kindness. Not worth the trouble. If it weren’t for those freaks of yours… Blackmailing good people and dumping their orphans on our doorsteps. Never paid us either, did they?”

Harry gathers his savaged arm close to his chest and melts into old dust and darkness. Then why did you? And who are they? Why am I here if you don’t want me? Wracked with pain, he thinks long and hard, twists and twirls his uncle’s words inside his mind until he finds meaning beyond bare loathing. Someone else is out there, someone else like him—that is the last thing he gleans before numbness overcomes him and swallows the pain.
Tom Marvolo Riddle becomes aware of his existence far too late to exist as himself. And more than that, he realizes—he is less of what he was and more of what he could be. A broken shard of soul, made of hate and madness and juvenile mistakes. He doesn’t understand what has become of him—what he has done to himself—until he grasps how little of him remains. Believing it is…wrong, that he has been wrong, is another impossibility he struggles to accept. But he does, oh, he does.

Clarity is slow to come within the long sleep. There is pain, nothing but pain, too much and not all his. He latches onto the pain-not-his with the jagged edges of his soul and pulls, rips, mutilates. A soul bleeds through, whole and pure and desolate. Not his, never his, but…he remembers. He remembers this—feeling like this, so very long ago, full of helpless fear that culminates in mindless rage. Unkindness in gaunt faces, childish cruelty, petty, empty words. I don’t belong here. Perhaps it is visceral abhorrence for weakness. Or perhaps that he cares not for remembering. You don’t belong here, he tells the other-soul, the child-soul not his. Then the memories surge.

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Light filters through the large window his aunt favors when she takes her morning tea, gaze focused outward, eagle-keen and twice as predatory. A creature of habit and slow-festering malice. Harry is too young to fathom that scandals are sweeter than the scones she nibbles, brown sugar for self-inflicted misery, but not too young to be wary of her gaze.

“I’m enrolling you in primary school with our Dudley.” An announcement, matter-of-fact.

Seeds of newborn hope sprout inside him, bright green and peeking through the choppy mess of strands that covers his eyelids. School. New people. Friends even. Freedom. School is the promise of friends, wonderful, precious promise.

Cold blue pierces through his budding elation. “You will behave yourself. I don’t want teachers calling to tell me you’ve caused trouble. Do you understand?”

No, not really. Harry doesn’t have enough fingers to count the many implications of trouble in this house. Despite his waning hope, his broken trust in expectations, he dares believe once more. Maybe, this time, with two of his tormentors absent, things will be different.

“Yes, aunt Petunia.”

Silence suffuses the space between them after his hoarse whisper. Tense, suffocating. Resigned, head hung low, Harry stands still and waits for the inevitable vitriol of her tongue. Her lips stretch thin, flesh drawn tight and bloodless, peeling back to show rows of overlarge teeth.

“Harry James Potter.” Syllables hissed, venom-drenched. His aunt stares at him as if dreading some kind of revelation.

Confusion furrows his brows—he knows his name is Harry, and Potter rings half-hollow, half-forgotten, but James is unfamiliar to his ears. Oh. Uncle Vernon has mentioned the Potters a few times before, a slurred litany of insults when heavy with drink after dinner. Potter must have been his father’s family name then.

Petunia nods curtly the moment realization enters his eyes. “That’s your full name and what the teachers will call when taking roll to see if students are in attendance. Remember it, boy.”

His chin dips while he savors the fullness of his name, another distinction, another proof his ties to this family are as tenuous as their tolerance.

Another hiss is flung into the lemon-scented air, sourness distilled into sound. Harry’s head snaps up and he sees bones outlined on skin that has become too brittle, too wan to veil the skull beneath.
“James was your father’s name, you know. Absolutely horrid man...he and his freakish friends, strutting around like gormless baboons, thought they were better than the rest of us normal, hardworking people.” Petunia’s breath comes out fast and frantic, chest heaving, saliva dripping. Spite personified. “Lily was bad enough before, but he—he ruined her.” Something vengeful snakes into her voice, rancor old and unforsaken, trembling on the edge of hysteria.

“And look where that got her. Dead and buried who knows where and you—” She inhales sharply, shattered and cut on all the pieces. Wretched. “Just like her.” Shaken, shaking, she turns her back on him. “Get out of my sight.”

Harry runs out of the kitchen, fleet on his feet and quiet, mind awhirl with questions. Friends—friends of his parents, just like them. He may not have friends, but Dudley has. His cousin has playdates and children to laugh with. Many of those children’s mothers are his aunt’s friends, too. Shouldn’t his parents’ friends want to visit him? Why have they not come if they are just like him?

Harry James Potter is a name he knows well, if only that. Fate-touched, beloved child. Pitiful, Tom learns, suits him better. What does it say for the magical world that this boy, his prophesied vanquisher, has been abandoned to the vicious care of muggles? What does it mean? Nothing is changed. He is no more and nothing has changed.

They love their saviors and they hate their villains and they are terrified of power. Of the primal magics, wild and instinct-glutted, the kind that break souls and minds and lives, their prices too steep to pay. Terrible, great things, they are. Better they drown their infants lest they become something that cannot be controlled. After all, they drown their magic-less ones. What is one more? Contempt seethes hot and deep inside the cracks of his maimed soul—because he has paid the price. Lily Potter has paid the price. Her son is now paying the price. And the magic is worth all that and more. But them? The ignorant, the shallow, the cowards, the imbeciles? Fuck them, he tells Harry James Potter, the magic-blessed, the magic-cursed like him.

Harry steps into the shower and steels himself for the frigid onrush. Water flows clear and free and washes away everything—the mud, the blood, the warmth, the fatigue. Shivers erupt as the chill slides down the curve of his spine, soaking through muscle and sinew, limbs growing sluggishly, alarmingly numb. He lathers his body with stiff, careful motions, teeth chattering, fingers contorted around the bar of cheap soap bought for his use. A sudden rap on the bathroom door startles him and the soap slips through his fingers.

“Aunt Petunia?”

A whimper answers his call. Petunia is kneeling on the floor, rocking back and forth, the white of
her sclera streaked with carmine, patches of skin boiling on her face and arms and legs. “Stay...stay away from me...freak.” She sounds...afraid. Her gaze flits to his then jerks away violently. Devil...she murmurs and crosses herself. “Into your cupboard. Now!”

Harry reaches for the towel near the mirror, body seized with shock and gooseflesh—and he sees. Blood-fire reflected in the misted glass. He blinks, and it is vanished.

That night, he dreams of hair and eyes the color of perdition.

Lily Potter lives inside her son’s blood—magic given sentience and memory. She burns. She loves. She hates. No subtlety, no inhibition, that war-fire red. Tom can’t even begin to understand what her sacrifice has invoked, and he isn’t sure he wants to know. Life-force devoured, from mother to child, bound to blood and skin, writhing and coiling around the boy’s magic. Molten wrath in swollen veins. The taste of her... He laughs and laughs and laughs. It is fortuitous that she is shackled inside her son—or she will set the world on fire. He will not be the first to burn, oh, no.

Sometimes, Tom sinks his teeth into her heart, feels her beating on his tongue, slick-red and smoldering—Petunia Dursley’s skin glows with sunburns on those days.

Hunger has ceded way to nausea and migraines two days ago. Harry has spent hours upon hours huddled on his sullied mattress begging for the littlest crumb of bread. Now...now he wastes with one side of his face mashed against the locked door of his cupboard. Openpleasepleaseopen—

A succession of clicking sounds drills into his ears. Disoriented, he barely catches himself before he is sent sprawling to the floor. How—? No. Food. Food first...while his relatives are still sleeping. The path to the kitchen is too short and too long, but he manages, cautiously, on the tips of his toes. After he has come and gone, with his hunger sated and cheese and bread spirited away under the floorboard, he contemplates the miraculous occurrence.

In the end, the how eludes him, but Harry never goes hungry again. Two months later, he laughs and names it magic, if only to mock his aunt’s manic proclamations of its inexistence.

The first month of school is an amalgam of wonder and disillusionment—infant words of praise, language challenges and math games, scratches and bruises under the umbra of recess. As for friends... Harry tries and tries and tries, but Dudley’s attitude mars his brave overtures. Unless he corrals his cousin into behaving, the promise of friends will remain a distant, hazy dream. And so he plans.

There is a strict policy against bullying, and he has seen it enforced in other children’s favor. Public exposure with many witnesses elicits the best results, but unfortunately, even simple-minded Dudley has learned that lesson quickly. Still, Petunia has taught Harry that adults like their routines just so, and the science teacher likes to take his lunch near the window overlooking the third bench in the school yard.

Dudley makes the mistake of assaulting him in full view of Mr. Wilks five times before another lesson sinks in.

Harry wakes in a circle of fire and white emptiness, two figures with him, silent, waiting. The woman—she is the fire. Vivid embodiment, an otherworldly elemental, threads of flame twined around slim arms and legs, rebelling, flickering in and out of form. Light shines fulgent and star-bright out of her eyes, the bone structure of her face too delicate to be molded into shape. He watches
the sinuous fall of her hair as it slithers and ripples, mesmerized. The man, in contrast, appears perfectly human. Except his eyes—

A spark of memory strikes his mind. Petunia burning, burning, fire-blood-hair-eyes in the mirror.

His heart is pounding against his ribcage, an uneven, restless tempo. Harry swallows thickly, once, twice. “Mum? Dad?”

A smile tempers the hard set of the man’s lips. “Not quite. But if you’d like that for now, we can be.”

Not quite denial. His gaze traces the patterns of dazzling, brilliant flame that is not quite his mother. “What are you then?”

“She takes the form known to the magic. It carries the caster’s will until her purpose is satisfied.” His voice is smooth, cultured, patient. Nothing like Vernon’s. One hand beckons him forward. “Come closer, Harry. She will never hurt you.”

Harry takes one stumbling step, and another, until he is running, running, leaping into her open arms. Breathless, blind, enveloped in searing warmth. She croons to him—my precious boy—a lullaby of two thousand nights—I love you—soft and sibilant—my beautiful baby—and strokes his hair with hands of fire. He burrows deeper and lets her dry his tears, salt-heat on his cheeks and scorching kisses on his forehead. “I love you, too, mum.”

An eternity passes. The sound of fabric rustling reminds him that there is another person near. Harry stays curled in his mother’s lap but tilts his head to study the man that is not quite his father. His thoughts must be transparent.

“I’m not your biological father despite the similarities between us, but I’ve poured so much of myself in you, that it doesn’t matter.” Fondness in his slanted eyes, in the pads of his fingers as they map the ridged bolt of tissue above his brow. “Bonds are important, Harry, however they come to be.”

Harry leans into the soothing touch and sighs. Yes…it doesn’t matter. What matters is—

“This isn’t a dream, is it? Why couldn’t I meet you before if you are—” Dead. But not what he wants to say. So he just smiles.

“Always with you?” Harry’s smile is met with a mirthful hum and a glint of challenge. “It is the other way around. You shouldn’t have met us at all, and you wouldn’t have, if your mother and I hadn’t… come to an accord.”

Harry’s smile broadens even as his brows knit. Talking with this man is equally fun and frustrating. He teases and baits with little morsels of knowledge until Harry reaches the right conclusion. “You are the reason that I…changed?”

“In part.” A quirk of lips is his reward, a mixture of pride and ruefulness, and Harry flushes with delight. “You were always a clever child, and in time, you would have developed the kind of shrewdness needed to survive in such a hostile environment. Resilient children learn to be resourceful given the right motivation—I would know.” He laughs then, his laughter pleased, if a bit bitter.

Thinking back on all the bouts of meticulous scheming and cool, precise calculation, food pilfered into the night and bullies exposed by their own hand, Harry understands. “But you and mum helped me.”

“You were never alone. It is a wondrous feat of magic that resides inside you.”
His grim reverence, the blood-rust in his eyes, how he accents that word are grave truths. Magic shadows his aunt’s nightmares, nourishes her false-images of alcoholics and car crashes. Disharmony—she lies—a haunting echo resonating—take me instead—wisps of fire looping and tightening around his chest and stomach. A sob. His mouth fills with ash and slow-chocking sorrow. “Is that why she died, to be with me?”

“It was what she chose.” He stares at him quietly, closely, red, red eyes and an immutable, ruthless reality, and when he speaks again, his tone is stripped of emotion. “I came for you that night. I killed your father because he stood in my way, but nobody killed your mother. Her choice took her life before the curse left my wand. My choice…it cost me one slice of my soul and this bond.” Something passes through his eyes but it is void, void in dark-hungry eyes, void under history and magic cresting endlessly. “After that, there are not many choices. Rejection for all of us—or assimilation. We could be birthed anew, if you wanted.”

Harry stills. This bond, this touch, this man he cherishes, he—not quite his father. He doesn’t wear the face of a murderer…his dad’s murderer. Why—why take his dad’s face for his own? Why then tell him? Why—why—why—Mind spinning, turning, reeling, pitch-black behind his eyelids. Just...just don’t...don’t ask...don’t want to know. The blaze of his mother’s presence licks his throat, breathes fire into voice gone frail with doubt. “Is that what you and mum agreed?”

An inscrutable expression has spread over the stark angles of the man’s face, but he dips his chin all the same. Maybe, maybe he too, wants to pretend.

“She holds the power to cast me out—that was her purpose, the reason her magic still lingers in your blood.”

What goes unspoken, what is being implied...devastates. Lightheaded, breath caught inside his lungs, and yet thought has never been more clear. “You mean that...she will leave me either way.” Harry sucks in another breath, stalling despite all futility, as if the puzzle isn’t already rearranged, waiting for the final piece to be slid into place. “And what you said before...you meant that we wouldn’t have met if I didn’t have to decide. So...here we are.” One last indrawn breath, and he takes the leap. “Why do you even want to...complete this bond? What would happen to you?”

The man smiles, sharpness peeking through, and it is boon, and entreaty. “This is but the final step of a process that has already begun. If you reject me, I will perish. All that I have ever been will become nothing. There are still parts of me tethered to this world, but they are...corrupted, drunk on mad ambitions and gone too far. They are not what I should be.” A soul-tearing stare, and Harry is overwhelmed by the implacable force that is his nature. “You could become that. You can become that. A second chance, if you will.”

You will leave me, too. The insinuation hangs between them like fate, tenebrous and preordained, divine intentions imposed upon the children of men. “You want to live...even if it is through me? What if I don’t—don’t become what you want?”

There is that slant of smiling eyes again, that tender press of fingers on rune-carved skin. “It doesn’t matter.”

From the beginning, Harry has known, that it has never been pretense. No lies in open souls. “All right.” Calm washes over him as resolve settles deep in his bones. “What happens now?”

His father laughs. “Now we sleep.”
Laughter in tandem with three heartbeats—*sleep, my darling*—a halcyon, fluttering rhythm—*hush, my baby*—dissolving in fire and white emptiness.

Harry James Potter wakes up on his eighth birthday knowing terrible, great love.
Memories of Days Gone By

Magic comes to him easily, willfully, power fluid and overflowing, limitless potential. It is made for influence and domination...visceral impulses, insidious. Harry struggles for control, struggles with control. How much is too much—wood creaking under the tight-clenched fist—a locked door—pain exploding like that sudden crack of bone—a reinforced door? How far is too far—metal pressing against the white-soft throat—a floating knife—fear blooming like that bright point of red—a cutting knife? Harry is glad that he isn’t pushed to find out.

His relatives fold within the first year. Petunia does more than that even—she explains everything. His aunt talks and talks and talks—of the hook-nosed boy stealing her little sister away with promises of wands and potion-making, the hidden shopping district, the magical castle, the wizarding war, the graves in Godric’s Hollow that she has arranged for but never visited. Harry listens quietly, then smiles and thanks her when she is done. Petunia frowns, perplexed, wary, before she interprets his reaction and what it will mean for her family. Horror distorts her features into a mask of sallow skin and friable bones.

Harry knows his aunt, knows her mind well. This generosity of hers is nothing but a guile, her way of enticing him into leaving now that the power has changed hands in this house. A pitiful, worthless gamble. Even if there is another world out there filled with people just like him as she is so fond of saying, Harry intends to stay until his letter arrives. It is what he owes her after all the years she has sheltered him.

Kindness begets kindness.

Harry comes awake on the morning of his eleventh birthday half-lucid, agitated, remnants of once-lived dreams fading behind his eyelids. Magic hums in his veins. An old-new exultation, a whisper of déjà vu. It has been like this for the past three years. Falling asleep to wake with the blood-singing of magic, seeking fingers, seeking curiosity, sharp and eager like new-born instinct, hunting a will-o’-the-wisp as it is evanescing. His hands never reaching and his heart in embers and pleasecomeback! He can’t remember what he has been dreaming, what he has been missing, only the magic.

Furrowing into the mattress, half-open gaze tracing the motes of light flickering high on the ceiling, Harry exhales heavily. It is too early. Why is his magic so—

Ah. Today is the day. The letter he has been waiting for three years will arrive today. He laughs, and the magic laughs with him.

A susurrus encroaches in the wake of his laughter, slithering scales, one low hiss after another. “Why are you laughing so early? You are giving me indigestion.”

His laughter ebbs into chuckling as curling rows of gold-tan settle over his stomach and thighs. Indigestion covers for all things irritating in snake-speak. Hera raises her head and regards him, imperious like her namesake. A wry smile splits Harry’s lips. “My deepest apologies, oh lovely goddess, for disturbing your rest. I’m expecting good news today.”

Hera’s head sways and lowers. “Apology accepted.” It is deliberate, slow and reluctant, as if accepting his apology is a great act of mercy, and only because he is her favorite human. She slithers
out of his bedroom then, probably to find her second favorite human who doesn’t burst into spontaneous laughter while she sleeps.

The ball python is, technically, Dudley’s. A gesture of goodwill on Harry’s part for his cousin’s adjustment in behavior two and a half years ago. The fact that his aunt has given in to Dudley’s demands for a pet to prevent that very thing at first amuses Harry to no end. One glance at Hera, augmented by Harry’s right-then-discovered ability to converse with her, and Dudley has been a goner ever since. The origins of Hera’s purchase will always be a treasured memory—his aunt’s expression alone surpasses his joy at the discovery of the ability itself. And he sees it every time Dudley thus says: “Snakes are brilliant, Harry. Teach me how to talk to her! What did she say now?”

Vernon and Petunia may have been lost causes from the beginning, but perhaps not so surprisingly, Dudley has embraced magic after wavering between half-terrified and half-fascinated for six months. Magic is the stuff of legends, after all, and he is a young boy, malleable and facilely impressionable. Harry counts it as his great act of mercy to correct his cousin’s atrocious upbringing.

“Blimey, Hera! That’s—! Harry! Tell her she’s bloody cold and to get off me!”

Ah. It seems Hera has indeed crawled into Dudley’s bed. Harry rises and stretches his neck, making a mental note to duck into Dudley’s bedroom on his way to the bathroom for more snake-cajoling. By the time he is finished with his morning ablutions, breakfast has been served and his uncle is seated at the table, sipping his coffee behind his newspaper.

Harry smiles at his aunt and sits down. “Good morning, aunt Petunia.” Sunny and sweet, just the way she hates it.

Petunia’s mouth thins into a grim line. Manners are the bane of her existence when they come from him. That he is so well-behaved, so like perfect-Lily, is another loathsome reminder. But what hurts her most...is what lurks beneath the surface. A lie she cannot prove. Nobody will believe the truths she itches to spread about her horrible nephew if she dares speak against him now. It burns her that she can’t. Poor Petunia. Poor Cassandra.

Dudley’s footsteps fall heavy on the stairs, and Vernon seizes the coming opportunity. “Get the post, Dudley.”

Harry is on his second piece of crispy bacon when his cousin enters the kitchen. Dudley detaches one letter from the stack and waves it before Harry’s face with aplomb.

“There’s a strange letter for you, Harry. Is this...parchment? Like the one Mr. Foster showed us in history class? Your magic school is weird.”

A genuine smile slips into the fake he maintains for his aunt’s sake as he accepts the letter. “Thank you, Dudley.” Only to slip out and reform into that sunny-sweet lie when Petunia stares at him. “It appears that my Hogwarts letter has arrived, aunt Petunia.”

His aunt swallows the bile that has no doubt risen to her mouth. “You’ll be going then?”

Harry keeps smiling. “Was there ever any doubt?”

Petunia’s flinch is overshadowed by Dudley’s excitement. His aunt may not be coming to the shopping district, but Harry is certain Dudley will tell her all about it. And she will listen because Dudley is her beloved boy, and it will break her heart because she can’t bear to break his.

The knock comes on a warm Saturday morning when no one but Harry is home as if by serendipity.
Harry has included a list of available dates and times for the meeting on his letter to the Deputy Headmistress, but he hasn’t expected such luck, and Dudley will be sad to miss it. Strangely, Harry cares about the latter. Stealing a glance at the hall mirror to affirm his appearance is presentable, he opens the door.

His smile becomes fixed at the sight that greets him. It is not the man’s semi-obvious, non-human heritage that bothers him, but the sinking suspicion that something has gone wrong with his application. Unless the magical standards for professionalism are…grossly inadequate by default. None of Harry’s teachers dress so...casually during orientation day. They are the ones who have taught Harry that first impressions define how others choose to perceive a person. Judging by his preconceived notions, this man utterly fails, and so the possibility of him being a teacher diminishes. And if he isn’t, as Harry suspects, then something else is afoot.

Still, he smiles, and plays ignorant, hoping that it is just a case of mistaken assumptions. “Hello.”

“Hello, Harry. Yeh haven’ changed a bit since yeh were a baby.”

The man is larger than life—his size, his voice, his smile. That last comment throws him off. A friend of his late parents? One of those absent people? Well then…

Harry’s smile adopts other qualities. “Excuse me, sir. Should I know you?”

A slow blink. “O’ course, yeh wouldn’ remember me. I knew yer parents. James and Lily were good people. Yeh have yer mum’s eyes.” He frowns at that, confusion wedged between thick brows. His gaze trails upwards, taking in the ink-soft waves framing his ears, then back to his eyes, as if he is seeing something that isn’t there. Or seeing something that he wishes it isn’t. Another blink, and his jovial mien returns. “Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper o’ Keys an’ Grounds at Hogwarts. I’m here abou’ yer letter.”

So much for mistaken assumptions. Harry offers his hand and endures the vigorous handshake. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Hagrid.” The door is slid wide open when he steps back, though if Hagrid will fit to pass through is up for debate. “Please come in.”

A shake of the groundkeeper’s head is all Harry receives.

“Jus Hagrid is fine, Harry. An’ we should be goin’ ter Diagon Alley fer yer supplies.”

*What.* This has gone beyond perplexing and to straight insulting. Harry doesn’t blame Hagrid. He has taken the measure of the man by now, and Hagrid…projects the image of the well-meaning but not very bright individuals, the people someone supplies with basic instructions and sends for their errands. The thought of visiting Harry has probably never occurred to him because no one has suggested it. There is only one way to handle this kind of people.

Gently. “My teachers expect to be addressed with respect, Mr. Hagrid. Is it not the same at Hogwarts?”

A flush of pleasure coalesces in the bewildered cast of Hagrid’s face. “Why yes, o’ course, ’s always good ter be polite, but I’m not yer teacher, jus came ter take yeh shoppin’.”

But firmly. “I don’t want to be rude, Mr. Hagrid, and I’m thankful that you came, but I wrote to the Deputy Headmistress requesting an orientation, not a shopping trip.”

“Wha’ do yeh mean, Harry?”

Hagrid sounds so lost that Harry vows to give a piece of his mind to the irresponsible person who
has sent him. And Mrs. Watts’ hawkish stare is drilling into Hagrid’s back. Oh yes…Harry will have words with that person. He smiles at Hagrid while in Mrs. Watts’ line of vision, and retreats into the house. “Please do come inside first. My aunt is very particular about our…social image.”

Dazed, out of his depth, Hagrid follows him inside like an oversized lost puppy. Harry is pleased at the slumping defeat on Mrs. Watts’ shoulders, and even more pleased at the moan of stretched leather. Petunia’s prized couch may not survive Hagrid’s visit.

“Would you like tea or coffee?”

“Tea…if yeh please. An’ thank yeh.”

When two cups of steaming hot tea and a tray of chocolate biscuits are placed on the table ten minutes later, and Harry is sitting on the armchair, smiling with warm welcome, all signs of turmoil have leached out of Hagrid’s posture.

“What I meant, Mr. Hagrid, is that I have questions about the classes, the subjects, the school policies, the career opportunities, and many other things. In short, everything.” Bluntness in his words, and gentle, knowing eyes. “Are you qualified to answer my questions?”

Hagrid bows over his teacup and averts his eyes. Subdued. “Well…not exactly.”

“I see.” What Harry wants to see is who let this kind-hearted man work in a place of education without providing the same education. Children can be the epitome of heedless cruelty, and someone like Hagrid is the perfect target. “Thank you for your honesty, Mr. Hagrid, and I apologize for any offence I might have caused. I assure you, that wasn’t my intention.”

“No, yeh didn’.” Quick to reassure, cup trembling in one large hand, Hagrid stares at him with such an open expression, perhaps afraid that Harry may have taken offence due to his ignorance. “I understand wha’ yeh mean’ now, Harry. Yeh wan’ ter learn abou’ magic an’ the school an’ wha’ they’ll be teachin’ at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, I do, and I will be sending the Deputy Headmistress another letter to correct this misunderstanding.”

Goal accomplished, Harry gathers their cups and the tray. He comes back to find Hagrid smiling at a photo of Dudley and him with Hera lazing around theirs shoulders. An animal lover then. “Shall we be going? If nothing else, I would like to browse the bookstores.”

A conflict brews in his eyes, astonishment on one corner, rapture on the other, with the latter steadily winning. “Yeh…yeh still wan’ ter go ter the Alley with me?”

“Certainly, Hagrid.” The bare address of his name has him lighting up like a Christmas tree, and Harry smiles softly. “Why wouldn’t I want to spend time with one of my parents’ friends?” If they have good reasons for not visiting…but Hagrid doesn’t need to know that. Mischief coils in his smile. “Just because you’re not an educator doesn’t mean you can’t show me magic."

“I can do tha’. An’ we can talk abou’ yer parents.” A handkerchief of gargantuan proportions is fished out of an inner pocket. Hagrid sniffs and dabs his watery eyes. “Yeh’re a good kid, Harry. An’ a lotta smar’, jus like yer mum.”

Minerva McGonagall hates August. The summer heat is torrid. Her desk is cluttered with piles of all manner of inane documents. The Board of Governors has rejected her fifth petition for the purchase of new brooms on the grounds of low budget. Albus is gone on his tenth pilgrimage of dubious
purpose. The Weasley twins are coming back. Divination is still an elective despite her best efforts to have it abolished. She has two muggleborn visits scheduled for tomorrow. And her favorite scotch has mysteriously vanished from its shelf. Severus’ work, that sneaky thief. The desire to rip out the Slytherin’s liver and feed it to him raw grows with each passing second.

A brisk knock filters through the chaos of her thoughts. Probably Argus coming to update his ever-growing list of contraband for the third time this month. She sighs, resigned. “Come in.”

Much to her surprise, Hagrid steps in, nervousness written all over his features.

“I didn’t expect you back so soon, Hagrid. How was Mr. Potter’s first foray into the magical world?”

“Well, yeh see, abou’ tha’, Professor. Harry said he’ll be writin’ ter yeh again, askin’ fer a professor ter explain…things.” He swallows and fixes his gaze on a spot above her rapid-creasing brows. “He said…said tha’ he won’ be acceptin’ until then. An’ he got books at Flourish an’ Blotts…abou’ tha’ French school an’ tha’ American one.”

Perhaps Severus is not to blame for the disappearance of her scotch.

“Pardon me, Hagrid, I must have misunderstood.” Minerva pins him with the weight of her cat-slit stare. “Did Mr. Potter imply that he may not be coming to Hogwarts?”

A helpless shrug ensues. “Jus tellin’ wha’ he said, Professor McGonagall.”

“I see.” Minerva sees nothing beyond the luminous green of floo-fire. “Ravenclaw Head’s Office.” Merlin help her if Filius’ scotch has also run out. “Filius? Would you please step into my office? An…issue has occurred with a new student, and I would like your assistance. Bring the scotch please.”

Four feet of chronic ebullience and one blessed bottle of scotch come out of her fireplace. “Hello, Minerva. Good to see you, Hagrid. What seems to be the issue?”

She sighs and pours herself a drink. “If you will explain once more, Hagrid? And please, start from the beginning this time.”

An awkward nod, and Hagrid clears his throat. “I wen’ ter get Harry like yeh told me, Professor McGonagall. But when I got there…Harry had all these questions abou’ the school an’ classes an’ I didn’ know wha’ ter say. He’s a smar’ kid, an’ polite, looks jus like ‘is mum, not much o’ James there though.”

Affection liquefies the depths of his gaze as he falls silent, and something else, something bleak, inconsolable. Minerva wonders what it is that Hagrid has seen in Harry Potter that evokes such deep emotion.

“Sorry, Professors, forgot meself fer a momen’. Harry said he wrote ter yeh an’ expected a professor ter come an’ explain things ter ‘im, then said it didn’ matter an’ he’ll write again. After tha’, we wen’ ter the Alley an’ I took ‘im ter Gringotts.”

Hagrid comes to an abrupt stop, opens his mouth, then closes it again. How his eyes glaze over in stupefied wonder forewarns Minerva that nothing good will follow.

“He almos’ caused a goblin rebellion, he did! Yeh shoulda seen ‘im, kep’ askin’ abou’ account statements an’ interest rates an’ all sorta things.”

Minerva can’t decide what shocks her more—the boy’s sheer nerve, the half-giant’s flawless
enunciation, or that to even investigate monetary policy can be the impetus for war. Binns’ lectures on goblin wars seem more relevant than ever. Not that she won’t have the ghost-professor replaced in a heartbeat, if only they let her. Damned budget.

“Tha’ goblin he was talkin’ ter almos’ drew ‘is axe when Harry told ‘im Gringotts should be payin’ ‘im fer keepin’ ‘is money like ‘em muggle banks do!”

A high-pitched oh my reasserts Filius’ presence. Much to her dismay—and seething envy—he appears greatly entertained. Minerva cannot find even an ounce of humor in Hagrid’s animated retelling, only disaster after disaster.

“But Harry kep’ insistin’, bein’ polite an’ talkin’ nice too, an’ the goblin took ‘im ter the back rooms. I dunno wha’ happened nex’, but Harry came back smilin’ with a bag full o’ galleons an’ apologized fer makin’ me wait. Tha’s the thing abou’ Harry, yeh see…bless ‘is hear’ but tha’ kid is so polite ‘s scary. Never seen no one talk down a goblin before either.”

Hagrid conveys the impression of the irrevocably overawed. Filius half-chortles, half-mumbles something that sounds like they’re too tall to duck the axe swipe, ha!—and Minerva stifles a sigh.

“Nex’ we wen’ ter Flourish an’ Blotts. Didn’ stay there long, on’y got two books. I thought it strange fer a smar’ kid like ‘im an’ asked ‘im why. He said tha’ it wasn’ fair ter me, makin’ me wait again, an’ tha’ he could shop ‘nother time, ‘pecially since he wasn’ gonna accep’ comin’ ter Hogwarts before talkin’ ter a professor. Like I told yeh, Professor, ‘em books were abou’ those other schools in France an’ North America.”

Intrigue sharpens the black of Filius’ eyes, edge polished by all the hints of rare intelligence in this child. Minerva is as pleased as she is devastated when she spies its metallic luster. Only one thought consoles her. Better Ravenclaw than Slytherin. Because Harry Potter will never be one of her lions—even if he may have singlehandedly incited the fourth goblin rebellion through forced politeness.

“After tha’, we sat at Florean Fortescue’s an’ talked abou’ Lily an’ James fer an hour, then I took ‘im home an’ came back. Tha’s all o’ it.”

Hagrid shifts in his too-small seat, more uneasy than uncomfortable, as if it is his fault that Harry Potter is nothing alike their biased expectations. It brings a tight-warm-tired smile on Minerva’s lips.

“Thank you, Hagrid. I appreciate you taking the time to accompany Mr. Potter to Gringotts and show him around Diagon Alley.”

Relief floods the half-giant’s body, mouth and eyes crinkling, smiling through that riot of thick-brown beard. “Yeh’re welcome, Professor, but I woulda done it even if yeh hadn’ asked. Harry’s a good kid, asked me ter owl ‘im an’ have tea again.” He heaves himself up on his feet, then bows his head. “If yeh’ll excuse me, gotta feed Fang.”

The door locks behind him. She gives her glass a twist, ripples of iced liquid, reflection of gold-green eyes. “You see the…issue, Filius?”

“Certainly, Minerva.” Filius’ solemnity lasts for the massive amount of four seconds. An effusion of laughter springs from his lungs. “And what an issue it is!”

Her composure fractures like jagged bone cutting into skin from the inside out. “Filius, please! This isn’t a laughing matter. If Mr. Potter doesn’t come to Hogwarts, there will be an outcry.”

Laughter withers into quiet scrutiny. “Since when have you cared about public opinion, Minerva?” Filius’ voice is soft and dark with knowledge. “What is the real issue? I haven’t seen you this upset
in years, my dear.”

“Oh, Filius.” He knows, she realizes, and shatters. “I fear I will never be able to face James and Lily when I see them again after so many failures.” Choking on regrets and should-have’s, choking back the taste of broken trust, the burn of betrayal in aged scotch. “I failed them once when I agreed with Albus that Harry should be raised by muggles. Horrid, despicable muggles at that. Who knows what they have done to him? Hagrid’s description must be a pale imitation of the real thing.”

“He sounds like a delightful child.” Filius soothes kindly. “Very promising.” Mirth winds around kindness, spiraling into his voice, on the verge of unraveling, holding back for her sake. “Very…” A snicker, half-strangled. “…polite.”

It is the wrong thing to say. Polite is Minerva’s greatest failure. He is the echo, the maddening want, stripped down to heartless shadow. That hot summer of ’57.

A girl who wants to forget everything and willingly goes where nothing exists. So foolish, so young. Falling into the void, the watching eyes, the abyssal hollows of the world. Hope waiting to be given meaning, trying and failing and trying again. That mouth with its own redness on a canvas of naked hunger. Lips pried open and made to swallow beautiful lies. Summer-lust. Slick fingers, slick madness, languorous and feverish like a slow infection, teasing, curling, sinking inside. Despair true and truly tasted.

When she raises her eyes and meets Filius’, desires whisper at the edge of despair, unfulfilled promises between now and then and redredred—

“And Tom Riddle was polite.”

Minerva McGonagall will never forget Tom Riddle. Coming home after graduation to enjoy one last carefree summer with her family, her future bright and secure in the DMLE’s prestigious offices, only to fall in love with a muggle farmer boy, to fall in the same pit as her mother. She’s seen where that will lead. A marriage of secrecy and no magic and crying, crying, crying into the night. A mother proud and envious of her children. A father full of love and fear for his family. She comes back to the magical world, her dream-job tainted by newborn resentment for ministry law, adrift in a sea of indecision, brokenhearted.

Two years later, Minerva is clearing her office, gathering her lingering resentment and her still-broken heart, and moving in at Hogwarts. Teaching isn’t something she has envisioned for herself—but she has had enough of failure. She spends that first summer before term starts buried in the dusty corners of Flourish and Blotts, researching teaching manuals and child development guides and transfiguration primers—and that is where she meets him. Between the shelves filled with books about the teaching methodology in Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Tom Riddle is polite. And Minerva has a summer fling with him.

Because he wants to teach like her. Because he is the quintessence of magic and nothing like her muggle farmer boy. Because his backhanded compliments stir the lioness that has been sleeping inside her for the past two years.

They end before they can begin because things like that are not meant to become more than a midsummer night’s dream. She still loves her muggle farmer boy. When the letter comes from home, and she learns that he has married, Minerva shatters. Albus finds her deep in scotch and crying, crying, crying into the night. She tells him about her mother and her muggle farmer boy and her Tom Riddle. And Albus tells her about Gellert Grindelwald and Ariana Dumbledore and Tom Riddle.
“Tom Riddle was Albus’ failure, Minerva, not yours.” Filius fills her glass and tells her in that soft, dark voice.

A sob touches the rim of her glass. Minerva washes it down with a generous swig. “I can’t fail again, Filius.”

“We won’t, my dear. We won’t.”

Filius’ conviction is a balm to her soul, but Minerva thinks of Albus’ obsessive crusade against Tom Riddle and all things associated with him, and dreads for the boy who shares his brand of politeness.

“But Albus will want to be involved, and you know—”

A snicker, full-blown. “Albus can suck one of his precious lemon drops.”

“Oh, Filius.” Minerva finishes her drink. If only she could be half as amused. “Please be serious.” A twinge of pain. But I’m always Sirius. How many times has she given that line to another boy, only to receive a cocky wink and that lame pun? Sirius Black is another name on her long list of failures. “Albus believes in Sybill’s drunken prophesies and Grim ramblings. He will not leave that boy be.”

Filius grins, full of teeth and sharp-tipped cheer. “I can always get my grandsire’s axe. They will never find the body.”

Minerva stares at him and hopes Albus never fails another child. Bloodthirst, that cheerful goblin-grin.
Scar

Filius Flitwick is an intensely inquisitive man. He likes to gaze upon the world with open, curious eyes, seeking knowledge in whatever shape it comes, analyzing the varnished exterior, layer after layer painstakingly lifted, until he sees what lies beneath, the deep-pulsing core of things.

Curiosity compels, enspells him. It is for that reason he visits the muggle world quite often in search of engaging debates with likeminded scholars. Their progress in various fields of study astounds him. Rapid, revolutionary, always in motion, never standing still. Filius’ visits have become frequent enough, lasting enough in the past years, that his glamour-identity of a reclusive physics researcher and his explorations into matter and energy are more than welcome in select circles of muggle theorists. He is careful, of course, never breathes the word *magic*, but Statute of Secrecy be damned—he wants to know!

Still invigorated by last week’s convention, matter-energy conversion hypotheses swirling in his mind, Filius apparates to the village of Little Whinging, Surrey, glamour-cloaked and vibrating with excitement. It is fortunate that he comes ridden of biased expectations—because neither Harry Potter nor his place of residence is anything like one may imagine. Privet Drive presents the ideal picture of industrialism, row upon row of executive houses for executive people, and the child who opens the door of number four—

Filius’ breath hitches in his throat, nostalgia suffusing his heart, meshing with the ache of unfledged potential violently ended. Lily Evans’ eyes stare out of a face too young and boyish to be hers, malachite ensorcelled, the light of her essence crystalized in time. He is all soft angles and verdant life. A crown of jet-black sits tamed upon his head, sleek waves over the arc of his brows, and between them, skin smooth, *almost* unblemished. There is no living-red-flesh in the lines that form the rune-mark—a *scar* that should be a *wound*. Only dead tissue, faintly outlined, so faint that it goes amiss if one is unaware of its existence, if one stares at the boy without knowing that *it is there*.

Poor Hagrid must have been terribly shocked by all these changes, amassed and compacted and shoved down his throat so suddenly. Filius still is and isn’t. That faded rune-scar…what it means…if he is right…*Extraordinary*!

Cheer returned thrice-fold, he gives the child a wide, beaming smile, all but rocking on the balls of his feet. “Good morning, Mr. Potter. My name is Filius Flitwick. I teach Charms at Hogwarts. It is such a pleasure to meet you.”

Harry smiles back at him, one charming twist of lips, and Filius can see where *polite* falls in Minerva’s scale of dark-lord attributes. It is roughly the same place in Filius’ scale of precocious-child attributes.

“Pleased to meet you as well, Professor Flitwick. Charms sounds like a fascinating subject. Would you like to come inside?”

*Ah*. There it is, in the nuances of his smile, that silk-soft inflection—cunning, razor-sharp, cultivated into an art. So many things conveyed in so few words. And so easily missed!

The deliberate choice in not reciprocating Filius’ greeting. *Perhaps yours, mine is still undecided.*

The flattering interest in his subject. *You’re here to sell me your school, so sell it, and sell it well.*

The open-ended question in his invitation. *Your predecessor had to be wrestled inside. Turn back*
now if you are under the same misconceptions.

Such a precocious child indeed! Poor Hagrid must have never stood a chance. Filius smothered the urge to giggle and award points for this masterful display of wit.

“Yes, thank you,” is all he says.

The interior of the house is a fusion of mahogany and shades of cream, quiet color, pedestrian. Harry’s aunt must be living a dull life if her taste in decoration is indicative of her personality. Or maybe it is a muggle thing. Many muggleborn children find wizarding couture garish and superfluous at first.

Harry ushers him into the living room with the effortless grace of someone used to entertaining guests. “Please take a seat. Would you prefer tea or coffee?”

“Tea would be wonderful.”

Tingling warmth glides over his skin as Filius releases the glamour. Wandless, wordless magic. *That* draws the boy’s attention—but not his surprise. Harry appears more captivated by the nature of the magic performed than the presence of magic itself. Even Filius’ appearance elicits no more than an arched brow. No accidental cases of magic for Mr. Potter then. It is a rare child capable of controlled wandless magic, and it seems Filius has just found one. *Marvelous!*

Settled on the edge of the leather couch, humming with pleasure, Filius’ satiates the intrigue glimmering in the green of the boy’s eyes. “A glamour, Mr. Potter. Brilliant piece of charms, very useful for blending in.” *How’s that for a sales pitch?*

A miniscule twitch on the corners of Harry’s mouth reveals he is aware that his challenge has been met. *Very good, Professor. You pass the first test.* Smiling eyes, smiling lips. Filius is inordinately pleased.

“My relatives will be coming home in an hour. Dudley—that is my cousin—would be thrilled to meet you. If you wouldn’t mind?”

“I’d be delighted to meet your cousin. Is he interested in magic?” Something niggles at the back of Filius’ mind, murmurs that is not…exactly the case. Students never come out and say it to his face, but he has heard hushed conversations in the corridors about dungeons and dragons, elves and dwarves and other fantastical races that bear vague resemblances to their magical equivalents. Muggleborn children do love their—*what did they call them again? Ah, yes, role-playing games.* His expression turns mirthfully wry. “Or in magical races?”

“Very.” Laughing eyes, laughing lips. Harry doesn’t come out and say it to Filius’ face either, but his laughter speaks louder than words. And on that note, the boy excuses himself to bring the tea.

Silence falls, long, uninterrupted seconds, then a stream of hissing sounds. Close, and closer it comes.

“Oh my.” Filius sucks in a breath when a triangular head climbs over the armrest and spills onto tan leather mere inches away. The new occupant of the couch observes him intently, swaying back and forth, pupils black-slit and distended and focused on his face.

“Hello there, my dear. Aren’t you lovely?” It stills, then slowly, daringly, slithers onto his lap, head pressing against his outstretched palm, almost preening, as if the creature understands the compliment it has been paid—and wanting more.
Harry comes into the room not a second later, carrying a tray with two cups of tea, sugar, milk, and a plateful of cinnamon rolls, and huffs an amused laugh at the sight.

“Oh. Don’t mind Hera. She’s harmless, and as you can see, utterly spoiled.” Hera chooses that moment to nudge Filius’ hand. The boy shakes his head as he bends to unload the tray, fondly exasperated, seemingly used to such behavior from the pet snake. “See? Shameless.”

Filius laughs, strokes the coolness of her scales, and she leans into his touch with a soft *siss*. “She’s beautiful. A ball python, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Correct. You do know your reptiles.”

Approval mellows the curve of the child’s smile. Another test passed then. Filius wonders if there will ever be an end to these tests, or if Harry Potter treats people as a disappointment waiting to happen and the only question that matters is *when*. Not *if*. It doesn’t imply nice things about his past, but Filius has come expecting just that. What follows will be nothing but confirmation.

“Considering that one of Hogwarts’ Houses is represented by a serpent, I’d say I have done some research.”

“Slytherin House, yes?”

An iota of surprise must have slipped into his expression, despite Filius’ tight hold on his emotions, because Harry’s smile sharpens into the beginning of another test.

*Hogwarts, a History* is very informative, if a bit dry.”

*Ah.* It makes sense in a sly, ruthless manner. Really. Hasn’t he just reached those same conclusions about the boy’s character? He *should have expected* this development. Relinquishing all restraint, he sighs. Harry has won this round, and Filius is not a sore loser. On the contrary, his defeat merits reward, and the only reward this boy will accept is the unadorned truth. Filius steels himself for some cruel questions with even crueler answers.

“You revisited Diagon Alley. Flourish and Blotts, I presume?”

“Mm. There were some…interesting titles that caught my attention the first time.”

“Titles featuring your name perhaps?”

“Among other things.” Unapologetic green stares at him, stares through him. “Tell me, Professor Flitwick, how did the magical world come to form such…skewed ideas about my person?”

“I’m assuming you’re not referring to your lack of glasses and ‘messy raven-black hair’. A big success with young witches, that last one.” Filius chuckles, but it is humorless, empty of feeling. He closes his eyes, opens them again, all feeling reflected in his eyes, ten years of living through the shame, and an overdue apology. “I’m afraid I don’t have an answer that will satisfy you, Mr. Potter. The truth is, that after Voldemort’s reign of terror, people needed something to believe in. A symbol of pure victory, if you will. Rumors spread, and you read the rest.”

“Voldemort.” The name rolls off his tongue flat, unimpressed, like the way Harry stares back into his eyes. No mercy, no absolution. “And his real name? You can’t expect me to believe that any mother would name her child *that*?”

“Tom Marvolo Riddle.” A pause, gravid with intent, powerful as the name itself. “He was a brilliant student who grew into a fearsome man. Very few wizards of his caliber are born in a century, Mr.
Potter.”

“I see.” Quiet, contemplative. Maybe this name holds more meaning to the boy than its anagram to the whole wizarding world.

_Do you? How much do you see?_ Filius waits for something to end, something to begin. For that dead scar to be laid to rest. For that jaded boy to learn how to trust.

“Do _you_ know what happened, Professor Flitwick?”

_Ah._ There it is—the _final test_. Eyes bore into his soul, eyes gone dark with magic, darker than the witching hour. This child… This magic swells with the foretaste of the Imperius Curse. Filius can’t breathe. To _be able_—

But _shouldn’t _he? If Filius is right…if it means what he suspects…why shouldn’t the child be able?

“I have…my suspicions.” Filius breathes and drags the pads of his fingers over that dip of bronze between Hera’s eyes. “Can you converse with this lovely lady, Mr. Potter?” _Trust me, dear child, and I will give you everything I know and more._

Silence stretches, magic rising, _rising_, an electric firestorm on nerves oversensitive, the scent of ozone in the air, and then, “I can.”

“I thought so.” _Thank you._ “Lily Evans was one of the brightest students I’ve had the pleasure of teaching. It took her less than one month to master the _Fidelius_ Charm—and that is one of the most complicated charms in existence. To hide _a secret in a soul_. The chant alone demands perfect enunciation, each word built around the subtle manipulation of one’s inner magic, wand-motions acting as merely the finishing touch that ties the spell together. It falls into the branch of intricate spell-weaving within another…esoteric branch of magic.”

Filius watches the smooth surface of the boy’s face to judge the depths of his awareness. Recognition is there, the name of the spell at least, the bare bones of its function, the devastation of its fatal flaw.

“Soul magic. I’m talking about magic that directly or indirectly affects the soul, Mr. Potter.”

A terse nod, lips full of bitten words, knuckles white around his cup.

“The _Killing Curse_ is another such example. It severs the connection between the soul and the vessel. When it comes to soul magic, the more direct an effect is, the more crude the execution. All the _Killing Curse_ requires is willpower and an incantation. Killing instinct becoming raw magic.”

Fingertips mimic Filius’ motions on human skin, trace the delineation of concentrated murder, the failure of the only curse thought to be unfailing.

“It can rarely be entwined with another more insidious piece of soul magic, if one possesses the knowledge and is…willing to fracture the boundaries between rationality and madness. Herpo the Foul created the ritual among other infamous feats of magic. One of the more obscure, thankfully. The culmination of his research in pursuit of immortality. To _split the soul_—the perversion of all that one _is_. A Horcrux. I will not delve into further detail on this subject…except for saying that there needs to be a receptor for the soul-shard. A rune-marked vessel, in this case.”

Filius inhales as the boy exhales, exhales as he inhales, every breath a transference of silent strength.

“_Arithmancy_ is an elective taught at Hogwarts that deals with the numeric applications of magic. _Three_ is considered an important number. Do you understand, Mr. Potter?”
“Ye-es…yes.” His voice spills out thin, throaty, tremulous. Fraught with understanding—all that is said, all that will forever be unsaid. “Is there any way to detect such magic?”

“There is no need. What is done is done.” Filius pushes all of his conviction into the forefront of the outcome until it becomes finality—a finality the boy can believe. It is the truth as Filius knows it, as Harry must know it, too.

“I told you all that because you asked and to provide you with closure, Mr. Potter. Whatever blood magic your mother invoked that night, in the midst of such potent soul magic, was the catalyst. When you were placed under your aunt’s roof, there were wards bound to your blood that acted as protection. There is not even a whisper of them now. Primal blood magic does not vanish unless its purpose is fulfilled. What is done cannot be undone.”

Filius smiles, the thrill of teaching this child stitched into his smile. “And you’re the better for it now, are you not?”

I am. An appallingly easy answer for something so convoluted, so nocuous. Harry thinks back on those years without magic, less than an indentured servant, less than a human being. Does it matter where the magic comes from now? It wouldn’t have mattered then. Anything…anything would have been better. A deal with the devil even. If he has become the devil…so be it. And is it not poetic justice? It is not enough, never enough…what has been given cannot measure to what has been taken. Nothing ever will—and he has learned to live with the forever-less. If it is done…if the sacrifice is made… What purpose is there in being undone? No. Yes. I am.

Malaise grows weak, dissolves deep inside his viscera, liqueces into peace. Harry smiles, his smile rigid on his lips, grim with the slightest touch of satisfaction. Vindicated.

“Thank you, Professor Flitwick.”

A mirrored smile. Just as grim, just as satisfied. “Think nothing of it, Mr. Potter.”

Harry likes Professor Flitwick. He has liked him since the diminutive man has stepped past the threshold of Privet Number Four. To be one of his students, to attend the school he teaches at… He likes the idea more and more. If not for Hogwarts’ history, if not for his parents’ wishes, then for this professor, this wizard who wants to show him magic beyond his wildest dreams. All facets of magic, unleashed, uncensored.

The mood changes with one clap of tiny hands. “Shall we talk about Hogwarts? Hagrid mentioned that you had…questions.”

There is eagerness in the professor’s tone, and dry amusement. Harry chuckles, inclines his head. Before they can begin though, the front door is banged open, voices echoing through the entrance hall.

“You drive slower than Mrs. Figg, dad! What if we missed the magic professor?”

“Mrs. Figg doesn’t drive, Dudley.”

“That was my—oh.”

Dudley comes to a hasty stop when he enters the living room, half-sheepish, half-overjoyed, gaze riveted by the sight of the part-goblin professor, like Harry has suspected. Petunia and Vernon…not so much. Chuckling again, he takes pity on his cousin.
“Professor Flitwick, may I introduce you to my cousin Dudley?” Professor Flitwick’s hand is disappearing inside Dudley’s larger one before Harry is done with introductions. “Dudley, this is Filius Flitwick, Charms Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” He bites his lower lip to conceal his mirth and stands. “Shall I bring more tea?”

Dudley nods mechanically, but Harry doubts his words have registered beyond Charms and magic professor. As Harry busies himself with brewing the tea in the kitchen, his cousin’s voice resounds throughout the whole house. Enthused to the nth degree.

“And you have an AXE? Wicked.”

Judging by the consequent thump of one light body hitting the floor, the professor must have manifested said wicked axe. Petunia has always been melodramatic.

Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands Since 382 BC is less than a store sign and more of a testament—undeniable proof of the ancient history of magic. Professor Flitwick must have chosen it as their first stop for this reason, for Dudley’s sake. The bell chimes pleasantly when they step inside, in contrast to the dim, eerie ambience the space exudes. It is claustrophobic, littered with wooden boxes and swathes of fine-spun gauze, silk-webbed mystique.

“Good evening, Garrick.”

The professor’s voice cuts the silence with the precision of a conductor at the start of a concert. A body materializes out of the shadows, congeals into folds of wrinkled skin and moon-gleaming eyes, and Dudley almost jumps a foot into the air. An old wizard with a flair for the dramatic then. Obscured behind his cousin’s quivering frame, Harry snickers. Perfect. Dudley will love this once his shock eclipses.

“Filius Flitwick. Walnut, Phoenix feather, ten and three quarters. Quite sensitive and excellent for delicate Charm work. Not lacking in power either. A fine wand for a fine wizard.” Ollivander’s voice is a polarity of sound, feeble with old age, powerful with old magic.

Professor Flitwick nods as if he has heard this hundreds of times before and is merely humoring an old man’s eccentricities. “And it has served me well, but we’re not here about me today, Garrick.”

“Of course, of course. Who do we have here then?” The silvery hue of his eyes becomes translucent starlight when it falls on Harry. “Ah, Mr. Potter. I’ve been expecting you.”

Imitating Professor’s Flitwick attitude, Harry abandons false politeness, treats the shop owner with bare honesty, soft indulgence. If the memory of his wand’s purchase will be imprinted in Ollivander’s mind, then he wants to be remembered as he is. “You’re not the only one, apparently.”

Laughter caresses his ears, perennial, natural like psithurism, rustling, red-autumn leaves. Ollivander laughs the laughter of forest-woods.

“Oh. You will do fine with that attitude, Mr. Potter. Wonderful.” His gaze, that moon-bright silver, moves on to his cousin with the same quiet intensity. “And who this young lad might be?”

Dudley ducks his head, hands tugging at the edge of his belt, fidgeting, embarrassed to be on the spotlight for once. “Dudley Dursley, Mr. Ollivander. I’m Harry’s cousin. Um, muggle, I think that’s what Professor Flitwick called us?”

Ollivander smiles, as if he has known all along, and still cares nothing for the origins of those who tread into his shop, only for their intentions. “Do you like magic, Mr. Dursley?”
“Yeah, it’s brilliant!”

Humming, Ollivander nods once, twice. “Perhaps I have something for you then.”

Dudley’s nervousness evaporates in an instant. Awe-struck, he smiles widely, with eyes full of wonder and gratitude.

“But first, Mr. Potter, shall we get you a wand?” Not waiting for Harry’s reply, Ollivander shuffles behind the counter, picking up boxes and discarding them without rhyme or reason. “Your father favored mahogany, eleven inches, pliable and excellent for Transfiguration. Your mother favored willow, ten and a quarter, swishy and nice for Charm work. I wonder…who do you take after? Not that it matters. The wand chooses the wizard, after all.”

Caught aback by the sudden assault of a measuring tape, a rather invasive one at that, Ollivander’s monologue passes over Harry’s attention until that last interesting tidbit. Harry pauses in the middle of his first wrestling match with what should have been an inanimate object to stare at the wandmaker. “Wands are…sentient?”

His moment of inattention costs him the violation of his nostrils. Dudley bursts into loud guffaws, and Harry can’t even fault him for finding humor in an otherwise comical situation.

“Oh, yes, most definitely. Not in the way of you and I, but all magic is alive, Mr. Potter. You will do well never to forget that.”

There is something in Ollivander’s eyes, warnings pale as the waxing moon, pulling him in deep, and underneath that, a galaxy of falling star-wishes.

Harry doesn’t know what he’s being warned against, what he’s being urged for, but he etches those words into his memory until he knows. What follows will also not be forgotten. Wands being placed into his hands and snatched away, again, and again. Until it happens, until… A flux of sensations. Heat searing the soft parts of his palm where wood meets skin. Burning immortality. Magic singing in his blood, trilling, spilling from the tips of his fingers to the tip of his wand. Phoenix song.

“Oh my! Bravo, Mr. Potter! Wonderful!”

“Wicked!”

Professor Flitwick’s clapping and Dudley’s exclamation bring Harry back to the present. His fist tightens around the wand that has chosen him, and he knows before Ollivander speaks what lies in its core.

“Holly, Phoenix feather, eleven inches. Nice and supple. How curious…”

The wandmaker studies him closely, quietly. Surprise doesn’t describe his expression. He wears the face of a father seconds after the birth of his firstborn. Overwhelmed, expectant, and a little terrified. Harry arches one slim brow, mouth curled, smiling as it is teasing. “You say that, but you don’t sound much surprised, Mr. Ollivander.”

A huff dispels the cryptic vibes Ollivander must have been aiming for. Harry laughs. Old wizards and their theatrics.

“And you don’t hold your tongue much, do you, Mr. Potter? Yes, you will do well, very well indeed.” He sounds part-disgruntled, part-amused. And wholly impressed, though if it is by his wand
or by Harry’s sass remains unclear. “I remember another young boy chosen by a Phoenix feather wand. Yew, thirteen and a half, and the same Phoenix that gave its feather for your wand. Brother wands are a rare thing, Mr. Potter.”

_Ah._ Resignation fills his lungs. One heavy breath, and it is expelled. Harry can’t feign shock even if he wants to. It is facile to guess the name of that boy. “Was the young boy’s name Tom Riddle perhaps?”

“Oh my. Yes, yes, it was.” Luminous eyes examine him, aglow with another kind of intrigue, more personal. Ollivander doesn’t ask how he knows that name, or what has become of it, only trusts the knowledge… And that Harry will become better than it. “Great things, he did. Terrible, yes, but great. I expect no less from you, Mr. Potter.”

Great expectations should be the new Potter family motto, Harry thinks, and sighs. Not that he even knows the old one. With his luck, it will be something like: _Victori Spoliaque_. Spoils to the victor, indeed.

“Back to you then, Mr. Dursley. I have here—where did I put them again?” After rummaging behind the counter for a few minutes, Ollivander emerges with three boxes, less ornate than the one holding Harry’s wand. “Ah, there it is. Child wands are mere toys to amuse the young and make them accustomed to magic. A simple enchantment, nothing more.”

Dudley comes closer, happiness dancing on his face. The wandmaker arrays them upon the counter and points to each one as he explains.

“This one is charmed to change color, this one to change size, and this one to change taste. Like so.” A tap of the first wand against the counter turns the wood blindingly orange. “Great for harmless mischief, as you see. They don’t register as underage magic either, so you need not worry about the ministry. Twenty sickles apiece.”

His cousin’s glee has reached frightening heights by the end of the demonstration. “Wicked! Thank you, Mr. Ollivander.”

_Wicked_ is an apt term for the things Dudley will unleash upon the Dursley household. Petunia’s next months will be…hell.

Harry smiles. Wickedly. “We’ll take all three.”
“—follow the instructions just so. Innovation is best reserved until after your O.W.L., Mr. Potter.”

The last place Severus expects to meet the spawn of James Potter is in Slug and Jiggers Apothecary before the term starts. But as fate would have it, that is exactly what happens. Why Filius accompanies him is of minor importance compared to the fact that Harry bloody Potter stands mere feet away. Severus hurries to secrete himself behind a shelf packed with jars full of floating ingredients—and study the boy. From afar, as he should, as he must. When he glimpses at the boy… reality comes undone. That is not James Potter’s face. Not his hair. Not his smile. Not-not-not-everything.

Lily is in him, in his eyes, in his passion. He comes undone. Only one thing holds him together, the thing that has overwritten James Potter’s genes. Severus has seen it in Albus’ pensieve once, and has never forgotten it. The Dark Lord’s face, his true face, before the rituals, the mutilations, the untold horrors wrought upon him by his own hand. How—? What sort of sorcery—? Albus will know. He must—

Filius’ gaze skirts the shelf that serves as his asylum, then zeroes in on him with startled recognition. Damn you, Filius.

“Severus?” Filius’ tone betrays hints of vicious delight, the kind Severus usually appreciates directed at others. “What a lovely coincidence. Mr. Potter, may I introduce you to Severus Snape, our esteemed Potions Professor and Head of Slytherin House?”

The Potter who looks nothing like Potter smiles the best Slytherin smile Severus has seen in decades. Not a smile, never a smile, but something deliberate, surreptitious. It says Severus has his undivided attention, and he knows he is not the first it has stripped to the bone.

“Pleased to meet you, Professor Snape. I look forward to attending your class.”

He does, oh he does. Lily’s eyes… Lily’s passion… Severus is an expert on truths and lies and in-betweens. The boy wants to endear himself but not lie. He doesn’t need to. The perfect lie is hidden inside the truth.


Mockery comes wrapped in a tiny bow from where he has neglected to be vigilant. Below. “You look forward to attending his class, Severus?”

Damn you to the hottest pit of hell, Filius. Severus scoffs, but he can’t find it in himself to put much scorn in the insult. Shock still grips him with fierce claws. “Don’t be absurd, Filius. It does not become the Head of Ravenclaw.”

“Excuse me, Professor Snape. If I may ask a…personal question?” Sweetness oozes from the tip of his tongue, each word honeycombed with innocence. “Feel free to decline. I assure you, I will not be offended.”

Infernal child. As if he cares about the boy taking offence. As if Harry Potter taking offence is a perilous thing to be avoided at all cost. Like the Dark Lord’s rage. And yet…this boy…so much like him. What will become of this boy? Will he become the rage? A shudder courses through his body, forces a reflexive nod out of him. How the boy smiles at him, at his reaction…it implies he has
expected no other outcome.

“My aunt has spoken of a Severus Snape, a childhood friend of my mother’s. Are you the one?”

*Oh Merlin…he knows…that devil-child knows!* Knowledge that will be used to torment him. Dread growls in his throat, a beast’s snarl, cornered, with nowhere to go. “Yes.”

“Thank you for indulging me this once, Professor Snape.”

Unfazed, Potter keeps smiling, not pushing, not demanding. All the worse for Severus. It means the boy has another way to extort what he wants out of him.

“Come now, Severus. Is that all you have to say after so many years of cherished friendship?”

Filius implements it in a superb manner, and Severus finally snaps.

“What do you want me to say, Filius? An ode to the vision of beauty that was Lily Evans? Or perhaps recite the stimulating debate on the correct preparation of bat wings during our second year?”

“Oh, Severus.” Filius’ sigh reeks of sympathy. If it is pity...if only it has been pity... Severus can handle pity.

“If you ever feel inclined to share that debate, I’d be delighted to hear it, Professor Snape.”

And Potter’s schadenfreude *rankles*.

“Unlikely.” What else can he say to that devil-spawn? “I will see you in class, Potter.” To Filius, though… His glare *sizzles*. “My class. Good day, Filius.”

Severus Snape knows what kind of person Harry Potter is with one glance.

He is sharpness in bright-dark eyes, and quiet control. There is *something* in those eyes—danger on the crown of mirror-flame, cold and calculative, sinuous manipulation—and underneath that, another tone of *red* lurks, chillingly similar to blood dripping down the teeth of a basilisk. Despite the reflections on his face, and through the smooth elocution, aggression seethes hot and deep in his veins.

Harry Potter *burns*—beneath the calm, the edge, the void.

Severus observes him with analytic eyes, dissecting all that he is and all that prowls unseen—and he is *perfect*...but sophistically human. The worst kind of monster.

The barrier between platforms nine and ten is a masterpiece of spatial manipulation. *Warping*—a concept that Harry has never expected to encounter outside of Dudley’s comic books. It is...*too* radical, too impossible, light years ahead. Especially for an anachronistic society, steeped in tradition and heritage, spurning change, stagnating. From quills to pens, robes to jackets, carriages to cars, simple transitions that should have gradually occurred, and yet...they bypass all that and plunge straight into theoretical physics as if to make a mockery of evolution. Not genetically, of course. Gods forbid these people learn the ramifications of incestuous unions. Blood purity runs too deep, too strong to be foresworn.

Ensnconced in an empty compartment near the end of the train, door locked with magic well-exercised in earlier years, Harry sees the perfect example of bloodline fanaticism. A family of three
that confirms the feasibility of human cloning. Morality be damned. Coiffed ash-blond, perfect bone structure, dressed in silk and ermine, superiority complex radiating from their pores. Nouveau riche at its finest, or Harry will subject himself to a lobotomy.

He can tell with one glance that this boy will stalk him until he makes an ally or an enemy out of him. There is no in-between with this kind of person. Oh, they will pretend of course, dance around cordiality at first, but an extreme will be reached at some point—because while Harry has the patience for venomous civility, this boy hasn’t yet learned the same lesson from his father. He is too young, too pampered, immature for lessons in politics and social maneuvering. Those will come much later, after puberty has tamed his hormones.

Having seen enough, Harry turns his head away, idly noting that vultures must have been the height of fashion fifty years ago, judging by the elderly lady who wears it as a headpiece. Old money, that one. Pity her grandson appears to have inherited none of her indomitable spirit. It takes nerves of steel to wear that thing with poise. But maybe, if the stare she fixes upon the boy is any indication, she is to blame for his weak spirit. *Disappointment*. So much, so full of it. There is little space for affection left in there.

Noise, smoke rising, tearful hugs, last minute goodbyes. Bedlam precedes the train’s departure, and when it is over, Harry melts into his seat, stretching his neck far back, eyes closing, unwinding. Many bodies pass by his compartment, many hands seeking entrance, but he ignores them all. It will be hours before the train reaches its destination—long, quiet hours, if Harry has anything to do with it. He dislikes loud sounds, loud people. A vestige of his life before magic.

Another pair of questing hands, tugging, insistent, then brisk knocking. This one seems more determined to enter his compartment, undeterred by the implications of locked doors. Harry stands, putting on a show of manual unlocking, waving his hand discreetly to dispel the true charm.

A hurried girl rushes into the compartment, hair wild-frizzed around her face, brows furiously creased, exasperated. “Excuse me, but have you seen a toad? A boy named Neville lost his.”

What an inane reason to intrude on someone’s privacy.

“I’m afraid that I haven’t.” Harry shakes his head, smiling, one slice of thoughtfulness, the polite side of condescension. “Have you considered asking an older student for help? There are all sorts of convenient spells. I’m sure locating a lost pet would be no trouble for a more knowledgeable person.”

“Oh.” She grinds to a halt, taken aback, chagrined. Perhaps by the ease of his solution. Or perhaps that it hasn’t been her solution. She seems to be the type—eager to please, eager to help, ever-curious, holding the keys to knowledge.

“Oh—yes. I suppose that must be true. Thank you.” That thank you slithers down her tongue blood-licked, bruised, like pulling teeth. Her discontent goes as soon as it comes. A whirlwind of excitation buries all signs of it somewhere between doubt and smugness. “I’ve only tried a few simple spells myself, and they’ve all worked for me. I’ve learned all the course books by heart of course. I just hope it will be enough—I’m Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?”

All of that in one breath. Harry laughs, unfurls from his seat. Sleek, fluid motion, bowing and her hand in his, waist bent and mouth yielding over the juts of her knuckles. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Granger. Harry Potter, at your service.”

“Oh.” Carmine smears along the curve of her cheekbones and down the hollow of her throat. She
peers at him under her lashes, abashed, charmed. “Are you really? I’ve read all about you in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century.”

Wryness spreads across his smile. “As have I.”

It startles her, his frankness, that he is aware of the existence of books, as if she has not met studious people before. Chewing her bottom lip, almost absent-minded, she nods. “Yes, I suppose you would have. If there were books about me, I’d want to read them as well.”

Amused, Harry humors her, but no more than that. “Indeed.”

Smart girl that she is, Hermione senses the dismissal in his reply, shifts back and forth, maybe hoping to prolong conversation. Three seconds, six, nine…she gives up.

“Well—I’d better find Neville.” Small pause. “And an older student.” Reluctant admission. “There are others searching the train for you, you know.”

It is soft-spoken, dragging across the silence, vengeance for stealing her prize. A threat. A pyrrhic victory.

Harry’s head tilts, eyes boring into hers, urging, teasing. “Why do you think my door was locked?”

She shifts again, embarrassed by her own spite, captivated by his. “That’s not very nice of you.”

“No. No, it isn’t.” A smirk splits the seam of his mouth. A dare hangs between them. “Will you tell on me, Miss Granger?”

She shivers, lips half-bitten, half-curled with pleasure. “I should.”

“But you won’t.” Harry can see it in the way she slants her eyes, the way she lowers her lids, that fulvous chestnut, that flutter of thick lashes. Infatuation. Hermione Granger is as enamored as she is scandalized. A tender press of lips on the back of her hand is all it takes.

“Miss Granger.”

“Mr. Potter.”

She curtsies, hastily, breathlessly, skin flushed, burning, branded with the imprint of his kiss. Harry watches the slope of her back as she leaves and bets on Ravenclaw. What else can she be?

Harry steps out of the boat last, steps onto the trodden ground last. One single step, weightless, timeless, and he is *sundered*—twin threads of consciousness, superimposing flashes, and between them, Hogwarts, *Hogwarts*. Mirror-sight, mirror-feeling. Something lives with an ancient pulse, encased in earth and stone, drumming above and beyond, calling. A slow, beating heart. His own heart throbs with an indistinguishable rhythm to that beat, and what lives inside him calls back, reaches out hands and legs, taking the second-first step. *Awakening.*

*What was that? What just—?* As if seeing through someone else’s eyes, seeing for the second time, like coming back, like coming home. He is so disoriented that he follows the gaggle of chattering students in a haze, blindly, witnessing events unprocessed. The return of the lost toad, the welcome speech of the Deputy Headmistress, the approach of the ash-blond rich boy.

“You’re Potter then?” The sneer is bred into his voice from infancy, no matter how underdeveloped, how infinitesimally suppressed. A poor attempt, laden with undertones of wounded pride, accusing
eyes. “I didn’t see you on the train—and I searched it twice.”

Harry is torn between laughing and quiet contempt, but plays the game, plays out his lines in the prewritten script. “Whatever for, Mr.—? Excuse me, but I didn’t catch your name.”

“Malfoy. Draco Malfoy. And I searched for you because you ought to know the right sort of people you should be associating with. I can help you there.”

Draco puffs out his chest as he offers his hand, self-satisfied, riding on the coattails of success, and Harry near pities the boy’s father even as he congratulates him for the apt name choice. How…cute. An entitled, sensitive, vainglorious, teething baby dragon. Mr. Malfoy has his work cut out with this one.

“Pleasure, I’m sure.” Harry shakes the boy’s hand. No calluses, no ridges in the texture of his skin. No life of toil for this favored son. It…infuriates him. A serpent uncoils beneath scarred skin, scales gleaming dark-green, writhing, rearing back to strike, maw full of viperous promise. If the boy wants to bare fangs…

A half-grin slashes across his cheek, and underneath that, six perfect…deadly teeth. Each one is peaked and dazzling in its apical terror. There is biting promise in those teeth—flesh flayed, bones gnawed, blood guzzled. “And, in your humble opinion, the right sort of people are…?”

“Tall, thin, and blond?”

“I meant people from good, respectable families.”

Draco reddens even as he blanches, eyes half-glaring at him, half-darting around, wanting to leave, refusing to leave. They have gathered the attention of the crowd by now. Children snickering, watching, judging. Humiliation is thick in the air, draws spectators like blood in the water draws sharks. Hermione Granger stares at him, then at Draco, then back at him, transfixed, outwardly disapproving, inwardly approving. When their eyes connect, she turns away, but still stares out of the corner of her eye, flustered, red as apple peel begging to be bitten.

“Ah, I see, perfectly understandable.” His half-grin relocates to the other side of his mouth, teeth sharper, deadlier. Not biting, not yet. “And what constitutes as a good, respectable family, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Draco has gone redder, whiter, licking his lips compulsively, searching for salvation and finding none. He can’t deviate from the script, can’t adapt to the situation. Public apologies are not wired in his skill-set. They require finesse, elegance he does not yet possess.

Parroting is his only response. “Purebloods, of course.”

That serpent-grin matures—Harry sinks his fangs deep inside the boy’s neck and tears his throat apart. “So, what you’re saying—and correct me if I’m wrong—is that I should take advantage of your generous offer to elevate my social standing since I…come from only half of a good, respectable family.”

More snickering, more judging.

Shame transforms Draco’s face into a rictus of helplessness. Blood-limned, grisly to look at. “What—no! What I meant is—”
Whatever he means to say goes unheard under the ruckus of the ghostly procession strolling in their midst, and later, the return of the Deputy Headmistress. Harry smiles, savoring the taste of sweet blood-spilling.

The Great Hall in Hogwarts is brimming with enthusiasm, young and old faces, magic flowing in high and low arcs. Harry chooses an isolated spot, away from all the babedism, preferring not to mingle with his future classmates in their current state of panic, and watches the professors in their high-backed chairs. Professor Flitwick catches his eye, beaming at him, inviting more gazes, some curious, some excited, some…other. Professor Snape pretends he doesn’t exist, but the professor beside him… Harry has never seen anyone’s pallor change so quickly, so drastically. Living death is his skin, and strangely enough, identical to the Headmaster’s for a split second. Interesting… He files it away, to be examined later if need be, as the Sorting ceremony begins.

Professor McGonagall brings out an old hat and a wooden stool, calling out names in alphabetical order from the list in her hands. After the hat breaks out in awful-rhyming song. Harry is awfully amused. One by one, children sit upon the stool, fabric pooling over their heads, the nape of their necks sweating, hands twined and clammy on their laps. Until the name of their House is bellowed. By the time his turn is up, Harry is certain of two things. The hat is reading their minds—and its decisions are based on the students’ wants. Excellent. Ignoring the various reactions his name elicits in the audience, Harry comes forward with slow, even steps.

As soon as the rim of the hat touches his head, a voice slips into his mind, whispered and rusted, imbued with grit and good-natured sarcasm.

Harry Potter. Well, well... Aren’t you interesting?

His lips curl wryly. I think the millennium-old enchantments woven into your fibers are more interesting than whatever you see inside my mind. What magic enables you to delve into minds?

A rumble of laughter echoes. The Mind Arts are old and subtle magic. I doubt you will find mention of them in the school library, but there are people on staff who are well-versed in them. Ask your future Head of House, if you’re so taken with power over the mind. My purpose is to determine who that person will be, not do their jobs for them.

Is that truly your purpose? Skepticism coats every word and thought. Your choices so far…leave something to be desired.

I spoke with Hermione Granger on the train. She belongs in Ravenclaw, and you know it. Memories rise to the upper layers of cognition, indisputable. Neville Longbottom’s toad displays more bravery than him. His willingness to follow another’s lead shows Hufflepuff loyalty. And Draco Malfoy… Satisfaction surges, crests, spills over the edge. Blood-drenched, languidly savored. Cunning doesn’t exist in his vocabulary. Can it be called ambition to follow in his father’s steps when his success has been guaranteed before his birth? We call that nepotism, you know. But he sure doesn’t seem to lack in Gryffindor boldness.

Laughter deluges the space where awareness converges. So tell me again. What is your purpose? To sort children where they belong—or where they want to belong?

Hooh. What is this? A logical argument. Very fine points, too. Dry as the desert is its voice, and just as testing, but more forgiving, more amused. Do I dare ask how you know the meaning of nepotism? Or how the word itself found the way into your vocabulary?

Harry laughs, tests back. Can’t you see deep enough to know?
A snort whizzes out of the cavity its voice dwells. Caustic, pleased. *Nice try, Mr. Potter. I’m still not regaling you with an in-depth analysis of the Mind Arts. You should ask Filius. After all, that is where you’re heading, where you want to go.*

*Yes, I do, but is it still the same place you would have sorted me if I didn’t want it?*

*Merlin, no.* Dryness leaches away into acid humor with another rumble of laughter. *Salazar would have turned me to ash and charcoal if I had dared sort you anywhere but his house in his time.* *Alas…these are different times.* A sigh tangles with its words, wistfulness stitched into worn fabric. Sorrow. *You could be great in Slytherin, you know.*

And Harry understands. *This* must be Ollivander’s warning. Magic that lives…*feels.* To be born with glorious purpose, and have it twisted into this facsimile of necessity, existing for the mere sake of tradition…must hurt.

*Undoubtedly,* he says. What little comfort that is. Still, the hat takes his word for what it is.

*So long as you know. Well then… I think we’ve wasted enough time. Do come by for a chat if the mood strikes you, Mr. Potter. Even an old hat gets lonely with only a firebird and a sugar-addicted old man for company. Better be… “RAVENCLAW!”*
Silence trails his footsteps as Harry descends to the Ravenclaw table. Clapping begins halfway through, hesitant at first, then thunderous. A cacophony shakes the Great Hall, reverberates down to its foundations. It comes rushing back crazed and riotous.

Gryffindor swamps with shocked faces that soon morph into crestfallen. A pair of redheaded twins are down on their knees, beseeching three different pantheons in six different languages. Loki’s name is chanted in hallowed cries until the Deputy Headmistress curtails their dramatics with a scathing dress down. Hufflepuff cheers amiably, and Slytherin abstains in haughty solidarity. Harry situates himself between a corn-haired, blue-eyed boy and a dark-skinned, dark-eyed girl of Indian descent.

“Anthony Goldstein. It is nice to meet you.” The boy’s handshake is firm as it is swift, his voice full of glee and overtone. He’s grinning, less dazzle of teeth, more flex of jaw muscle, the kind of mad grin one wears as he stands victorious over the corpse of his enemy.

“Malfoy deserved that.” Anthony’s grin dims, but glee still decorates his mouth like a gilded trophy. “You’ve no idea how many times I’ve had to endure his condescending attitude because I’m a half-blood at the annual ministry ball. I don’t even know why they are invited. My father works at the Ministry of Magic, but his sure doesn’t. Unless greasing the Minister’s palm is considered an occupation. At least that’s what dad always says.”

Harry has suspected it is something along these lines. Anthony’s antipathy is both shallow and deep. A commodity in the magical world. Sins of the father, old grudges that outlive their originators. Blood feuds perpetuating long after transgressions have been forgotten. An inheritance of senseless violence. He doesn’t hold it against Anthony, but if the boy is dead-set on antagonizing Draco, then he should at least know his enemy better.

“Mr. Malfoy is probably aiming for a Wizengamot seat in the future.”

A pale brow rises. Anthony stares at him, blue eyes speculative, intrigued. “Really? How do you figure?”

Harry hums, amused. Should he be fueling the boy’s enmity? Perhaps not…but he likes the genuine quality in Anthony’s eyes. It will be a shame if the boy loses that honesty, if he becomes inveigled to the sickly morass of politics.

“I researched the Ministry of Magic, especially law and legislation. My great-grandfather served on the Wizengamot early in the century. Henry Potter’s pro-muggle views were one of the reasons for the Potter family’s exclusion from the Sacred Twenty-Eight. It is all about politics, and Mr. Malfoy sounds like a political animal.”

Anthony’s brows rise higher with each sentence until they reach his hairline. “Huh. Well…that makes more sense.” Incredulity wrinkles the expanse of his forehead—and respect. Palpable in the soft timbre of his voice. “You seriously researched all that?”

Harry smiles, but it is downcast, exhausted, an accumulation of sleepless nights and melancholy. “I’m the last to carry my family’s name. If I want to know what they were like, then I have to search for every little scrap of information in history books and past editions of The Daily Prophet.”
Anthony’s jaw clicks shut. He winces, speaks hoarsely, skin drawn taut, bloodless. A rasp of contrition. “Right. Sorry, I didn’t realize… I can ask my dad if there’s anything about Potters in the archive? He works in the Department of Magical Education. Maybe he can find past N.E.W.T. records or something?”

Such refreshing honesty, such intense emotion. This is why Harry is beginning to like Anthony. His mouth lifts, an upturn of rich warmth. “It’s fine. You were just curious, no harm done. I appreciate the offer. Thank you, Goldstein.”

Color returns to the boy’s face, the dull blue of his eyes. A sharp intake of breath exposes the eavesdropping girl on his right side. Harry chuckles, then turns to face her, still smiling, inviting. It is his killer smile, his true smile.

“And you, lovely lady?” A brush of lips, light pressure against her knuckles, skin languorously lavished.

She blushes, an exotic dusting of cheeks. “Padma Patil, pureblood. Not that Malfoy will ever acknowledge it.”

Words slathered with an indignant layer, proof of silent participation. It appears little Draco has embraced all facets of racism without care for political correctness. That Wizengamot seat will elude Mr. Malfoy for years to come if he persists in bringing his son to social functions in an effort to instill political acumen into him.

“And you have suffered alongside Goldstein then?”

Padma’s lips purse, pouting as it is taunting, an exaggeration of pureblood egotism. “My father is the Indian ambassador. We get an invitation every year, but I stopped attending after the third time Malfoy accidentally spilled his punch on my dress.”

She channels the Queen’s displeasure over a peasant’s insult. Effortlessly, gracefully. Harry laughs at her perfect mimicry, bows his head in appreciation for an excellent performance.

“Impeccable manners. Pity he is so clumsy. His poor mother must be dreading any social outings.”

Anthony erupts into howling laughter. His eyes flash with a lupine glint, and he latches onto Harry’s words with the ferocity of a starving wolf. “Oh, I like you, Potter. Have to remember that line for next time that git insults the manners I’ve learned from my lowly mother.”

Harry lets him have his juicy bone, bows his head again. “I aim to please.”

Anthony snorts. “Pfft. You’re so full of it.”

“I like it.” Padma smirks as she links her arm with his. So coquettish.

Harry strokes the delicate bend of her elbow and laughs. Friends…maybe. A beautiful friendship in the making.

Filius feels the phoenix-fire of Albus’ gaze burning against the back of his neck as he excuses himself from the table. Albus will want to have words with him sooner than later, and Filius eagerly awaits his summons. Long has he waited, too many years, too many secrets. It is the least Filius can do, and he owes it to Lily.

Sharp-witted Lily, sweet-thorned flower. Her wraith torments him. She comes to him in his sleep,
green moribund as the last breath of spring, as the dead come to the living. You said to me there is another way. You. Said. To. Me. Hasn’t he? Hasn’t he begun what now awakens? What has been hidden, errantly forgotten, gone unwanted until her son walks the castle halls and brings the sound of it with him. Who speaks of souls and breaks the cycle? Who speaks of blood and stokes the fire? But what else could he have done? Nothing to be done. Nothing for it.

Albus will learn as Filius has learned, and Harry—he too, will learn in time. It is too soon, too early for the boy. If he knows…when he knows. Only then will Filius speak of souls and blood one more time.

His footsteps halt before the eagle-shaped knocker that has guarded Ravenclaw’s entrance for one thousand years. There is a password to override the riddle for the Head of House, but outside of an emergency, Filius derives pleasure from such word games.

“You heard me before, yet you hear me again. Then I die, until you call me again.”

Gravelly, an echo of bronze metal grazing stone and flesh. Filius chortles. “An echo.”

The entrance is swung open, sound and light penetrating the quiet of the corridor. Filius steps inside with leisure, inspecting the line of babbling first years, lingering on Harry and his company for a few seconds. Lily’s son is making friends already. The sight fills him with joy. Satisfied, he nods once at the Prefects hovering in the background. A tap of his wand to the throat magnifies his voice.

“Welcome to Ravenclaw. I’m Filius Flitwick, Charms Professor and Head of our House.” Silence, and all eyes on him. Filius ends the charm with another tap, smiling, welcoming. “I won’t hold you up for long tonight, so bear with me.”

As per yearly routine, a stack of folded parchment is distributed to each and every one by the Prefects. Most children eye them curiously, but not one attempts to unfold them. Filius nods again when the fifth years retreat to the edge of the line, and carries on.

“Firstly, there are maps available that detail the castle as accurately as they can. Hogwarts has a tendency to…rearrange itself often, especially the moving staircases. Most of the classrooms should remain where they are, but the routes can be suddenly altered.”

Confusion spreads among them, intermingled with excitement. Whispers about living castles and moving stairs circulate in awed tones. Filius’ smile widens. This is why he loves his job.

“Secondly, there will be monthly evaluations. I will pass the schedule tomorrow morning along with your curriculum. If you’re failing in a subject or having any kind of trouble, anything the Prefects can’t resolve, my door is always open. You don’t have to wait for your arranged meeting to come talk to me.”

A scant few swallow thickly, perhaps unaccustomed to close supervision, but the majority smiles, pleased with the idea of responsible authority. Filius hums, coming to the last point, the most salient one.

“Finally, there have been previous instances of…bullying in this House. Ravenclaw tends to gather the scholars, the researchers, the sceptics, the visionaries. A clash of ideas and personalities is bound to occur, so please be kind when you are defending your viewpoint. Not everyone will share your perspective, but that is no reason for cruelty.”

His gaze seeks theirs, enforcing the sincerity of his words. One by one. Gently, resolutely. A multitude of reactions—timid nods, lips chewed, eyes averted, feet shuffling. One boy lifts his chin,
defiant, and Filius takes special notice of him. Mr. Corner will bear closer watching than the rest.

Another nod to the Prefects has them bursting into motion.

“Thank you for your patience. That is all for tonight. Please follow the Prefects to your assigned rooms.” As they separate in groups of two and fall in line behind the fifth years, Filius beckons the only boy who has been pleasantly smiling during his whole speech. “Mr. Potter, if you could stay behind for a moment.”

Harry Potter murmurs low-soft words to Miss Patil that shape her lips into falcate loveliness, tells Mr. Goldstein that he will see him upstairs soon, then approaches Filius with measured steps. That boy—so much like Lily, so much like the girl who slithered secrets out of Slytherin minds, so much like the woman who clawed devotion into Gryffindor hearts.

“I admit that I half-expected you to end in Slytherin. It brings me immense joy to have you in my House, Mr. Potter. I apprenticed your mother for almost two years before—well, before that tragedy. She was a brilliant witch and a shrewd woman. Lily Evans was nobody’s fool.”

Something sinks inside the boy’s gaze as he absorbs the spoken words, visceral gratification, fire frozen in bathypelagic deep. Filius studies him but all that remains is its shadow and green—green—pulling eyes.

“I chose Ravenclaw, Professor.” I chose you.

“As did I. As your mother chose Gryffindor. I’m glad you understand.” Nothing has gone unacknowledged but it will go unspoken. It is enough for now. Filius smiles, almost dismisses the boy, before he recalls the reason he has held him back. “Oh, I almost forgot. Minerva wants to see you in her office before classes begin. Eight o’clock, Mr. Potter.”

Harry’s expression smooths into polite interest. “The Deputy Headmistress?”

Mirth thrums low in Filius’ throat. It is polite…but when it comes to this boy, razor-edged. “Yes, nothing to worry about. I believe it has to do with your letters.” Harry dips his head at that, and Filius waves him away. “Now up you go. Good night, Mr. Potter.”

“Good night, Professor Flitwick.”

As the boy climbs the stairs to his new dorm, Filius wishes Minerva all the luck tomorrow. In truth, she will need much more than that.

That night, Harry sleeps under bronze-blue, and dreams of Hogwarts in silver-green.

Minerva waits behind her desk, elbows digging into the lacquered surface, nerves pinched, spine rigid. Staring out the window, quiet, edgy, biding. Light filters through the thick glass, old-spelled to the maker’s will, bright gold washing over her. If the weather is fair, it will reflect that fairness, will always be that hue of bone-melting warmth. It does nothing for the chill she feels deep in her marrow this morning. Guilt can’t be spelled away even by the potency of Salazar’s enchantment.

It is rather ironic, remnant of some immemorial prank. The office of the Head of Gryffindor purrs with Slytherin magic as Severus is ever gleeful to remind her. If only he knew… But what does that boy know of Slytherin blood? That boy…self-tainted, green-jaundiced, tattooed on his skin, bound to the serpent’s call, and yet… Never taken. Never known how it feels inside. She shivers, bites the inside of her cheeks until she tastes blood and pain and guilt so raw—

James’ son enters her office the same way as the man she aches to remember and the man she aches to forget. As if he owns the room. Gryffindor fearlessness, Slytherin suavity, both in the same gait. Minerva stares, keeps staring, paralyzed.

“Good morning, Professor McGonagall.” A slight frown seeps into his smile when she stays quiet, still staring. “Or do you prefer Deputy Headmistress outside of class?”

Something tangy and viscous pools under her tongue, coagulates around wet flesh, but she forces the words through the sticky membrane. “Professor will do, Mr. Potter.” Harry, she thinks, no one’s son, no one’s simulacrum. What good will it do for anyone to make comparisons? Easier for her, fairer to the boy, if in the privacy of her mind, he is always Harry.

Green lances through her from across the desk, molten as cooling steel, forged through fire and brimstone into cutting perfection. Minerva straightens her back in the face of such appraisal, gives that green-eyed boy his due.

“I owe you an apology, Mr. Potter. I… mishandled your situation, and for that, I apologize.”

A tilt of his head, his mouth smiling, acknowledging. “Thank you, Professor. I do appreciate it, and I do understand that you must have been terribly busy during August.”

It is more question than statement, that attached sentence at the end, subtly inquiring, careful. Ah. So he suspects. Called to the Deputy Headmistress’ office on the first day of term and offered an apology of all things…of course he can see past the weak excuse.

One snap of her fingers alerts Ramsy, and tea is instantly served. She smiles, her smile paper-thin, ripping as it forms, torn at the edges. “Tea?”

“Thank you.” So polite. It cuts her bone-deep.

“You must have surmised by now that I wasn’t simply apologizing for the miscommunication in our correspondence. Filius advised me to be honest with you, if I wanted us to form a deeper bond—and I do.”

Minerva puts her heart inside that word. Heart cut out, heart still beating, and in that beating, blood for the broken bonds, sacrificed to birth meaning into another one. His eyes delve into hers, reaching for that arrhythmic pulse, testing the purity of her intentions. Silent, he smiles, and her heart mends just a little.

“James Potter was my protégé, you see. If things had been different, he would have been my apprentice, but war waits for no one. Your father was a fighter, always had been. He chose to fight to protect his family, to fight for what he believed in, for your mother. We were still close, close enough that I… I should have known better.” The truth is like the quenchless voracity of the undead, hurts more than that even, more than blunt-rotted teeth, hordes of inferi gnawing on strips of flesh and too-warm organs. “That night, on that muggle doorstep, I should have known better. I failed James and Lily—and you.”

It is still nothing to the hurt this boy must have felt. Minerva can see it in the way his face becomes nothing. Blank, motionless, absent the merest spasm of muscle, the face of someone who has prayed for deliverance. He doesn’t deny it either, doesn’t insult her with feigned emotion, only stares at her. Bottomless viridian, the center of the whirlpool, the calm before the storm.

“Were you the one to place me with my relatives?”
Oh, Harry. As if that matters... as if that makes any difference... But if he wants the paltry excuses, Minerva will give them up to the last one. No more from this day forward. This, she vows, and woe betide the oathbreaker. Shame on her if Albus fools her twice.

“No. That was Albus’ decision, but I saw... I saw and I didn’t fight hard enough. I trusted his decision, and I didn’t fight for you.”

Perhaps it is because she has given him everything that he, too, gives something back. “I wondered when I was younger why there were no visits.”

“I wanted to come, but Albus assured me that you were taken care of, that it would be better if you had no contact with the magical world. Things were quite volatile during the first years after Voldemort’s fall. His followers were looking for you everywhere, and there was a chance that I would have led them straight to you. After things calmed down, I asked again. Albus told me he had Arabella watching over you and that you were fine.”

Something clicks inside his mind, then the merest twitch of his lips. Blankness has all but melted into reserved hilarity. “Mrs. Figg is a witch?”

Minerva’s brows emulate the boy’s lips. Arabella must have been so obvious. Not for the first time she wonders how it has escaped her notice that Albus is well past the age of onset for senility.

“A squib.” Minerva opens her mouth to explain what the term means, but closes it when there is no sign of surprise on his face.

“Her cats did seem unusually... clever. Mr. Tibbles kept leaving dead pigeons on my aunt’s doorstep. It was very amusing.”

Harry huffs out a soft laugh, and Minerva smiles in satisfaction, teeth peeking through and the slightest touch elongated.

“Her cats are part-Kneazle. Clever, insightful creatures. If they dislike someone... well, dead pigeons happen.”

Nodding, Harry studies her smile, gaze tracing the points of her teeth, back and forth, until he’s grinning up at her. Thrilled, caught in the throes of some great discovery. “Mm. I’ve always liked cats.”

Minerva’s smile broadens. “Me, too, Mr. Potter.”

“You may call me Harry, Professor.”

Oh... oh. And her heart soars. She finishes her ice-cold tea—the best tea she has drunk in ten years.

“Tea every first Sunday of the month then?”

“I’d love to.”
Darker than Black

Magic is opium for those who take it into their body. All-consuming. Primal. Sip by sip, absinthian drink, power melted into ecstasy. Voldemort can never have enough. More—give me—all… It drags on his skin, energy feral-edged and possessive, sliding sharp and deep, raw will liquefied, slithering beneath the surface, throbbing. Fire in the flesh, lust in the veins. A change of skin. Power sinks into bone and medulla, sinewy tissue and muscle, tendons and joints, devastates all that he is. A mass of spasms and voracity and perspiration. Voldemort groans, devours it to its last drop, begging for more.

He is breathless and still gasping for more when the flow ends, the soul dies. A shiver touches every inch of his skin, and he pushes himself to his feet. Air inflates his lungs, spills out of his throat with a sigh. The air is thick with smells, heavy with the aftertaste of magic. Pungent odors, bodily fluids strewn on the ground in a pool of blood and clots, drenching the earth, permeating his senses. Satisfied, Voldemort examines the temporary vessel, running his fingers over new skin, testing warm, flexing muscle.

Quirinus’ body is a soulless husk of flesh that will not last for long. Six months, perhaps less. It will have to serve its purpose before then. Supplanting Quirinus’ soul hadn’t been his intention when he arrived at Hogwarts, merely borrowing his body, but no plan survives contact with the enemy. Harry Potter has forced him into extremes. Even the Philosopher’s Stone comes second to the boy, nothing more than a passing opportunity.

That boy…soft face, soft fire, uncanny similarity…not the color, not the physical, something deeper, intrinsic. If it is only the slant of his eyes, the angle of his cheekbone, those silky black waves—he can pass all that off as the result of perfect gene selection. But not…not the way he exploits these genes, hollow fangs beneath his smile, slow poison in his voice, that streak of polite aggression, that smooth-talking sorcery. Harry Potter is an echo, the pure potential Tom Riddle has once been.

What it means, what the boy is…disturbs him. Voldemort knows—the depths he has sunk to, the magics he has delved into, all the things that erased Tom Riddle. That boy should exist in thick vellum pages, on black-jeweled gold. Harry Potter should not be that boy. What has become of his soul? Where has it gone? Wrong…all wrong…and that damned prophesy. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches… Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies… Vanquish him, it said. Power, it said. What more did it say? What could it have said that brought this outcome?

He doesn’t know. He needs to know. If that means abandoning the stone, so be it. His soul is more important.

Harry hums as he places the textbook for DADA on the desk, sitting between Padma and Anthony. Hogwarts’ classes have been an…interesting experience so far. Some abysmal, some brilliant, some lukewarm. Charms and Transfiguration are his favorites, but maybe he is just a little bit biased. He likes the professors as much as their subjects. Astronomy is an exercise in insomnia, not to mention the outdated equipment. Herbology is pleasant and educational enough—there is just something soothing about working with nature. He hasn’t had Potions yet. And the less said about History of Magic, the better.

Professor Quirrell strides inside the classroom with crisp, precise steps. Face set in stone, robes immaculately pressed, scalp clean-shaven. He cuts an impressive figure, obliterating Harry’s first impression at the welcoming feast. His voice bears the qualities of his gait when he speaks.
“Welcome to Defence Against the Dark Arts. Note the sign outside the classroom is not humorous decoration. If I see any student attempting to cast a curse on another, it will be one month of detention for the first offence. I’m sure you can guess a second offence will merit harsher penalties, and a third...well, I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and say you’ll have learned better by then.”

Doubt colors all the flats and sharps in his tone despite his otherwise claim. Acerbic wit and the barest hint of patience. Harry thinks he might actually like Professor Quirrell. A hand is raised in the air then. Harry doesn’t even need to turn to know whose hand it is. That belligerent waving can only belong to Michael Corner. The professor doesn’t seem to appreciate it either.

“Yes, Mr. Corner?”

Michael curls his upper lip, every inch the cool, brooding anti-hero. “We’ll be learning curses this year?”

Professor Quirrell’s throat vibrates with an indecipherable sound. He speaks slowly, carefully, emulating parents when first teaching their children how to talk.

“Did you open your textbook before coming to class, Mr. Corner? I’m going to take a guess and say no. Because if you had, you’d know that we won’t, in fact, be learning any curses this year. Most first year students don’t have the magical puissance needed to power even the simplest curse. There are exceptions, of course, which is why my warning was against attempting. Some parents think it prudent to teach children magic beyond their years before coming to Hogwarts, if only in theory.”

An iota of mockery lurks between the words. A veiled insult to pureblood dogma, if Harry has inferred correctly. The professor must have tangled with overconfident pureblood scions in his Hogwarts’ years, and come on top of them.

Michael hunches back in his chair, half-chastised, half-embarrassed, just as Harry raises his hand. Professor Quirrell stares at him for a long, quiet moment. Inscrutable, immovable.

“Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“You implied magical puissance increases with age, and I’m guessing practice, too. Does that mean we are born with limited magic, reach our peak at some age, and can go no further than our natural reserves? Or that we possess a limitless amount since birth and it depends on the individual how much they choose to harness and how much further to develop?”

Padma and Anthony still beside him, as does the rest of the class. Many gazes, many silences. Harry bites the inside of his lip, soft flesh abused in amusement. Have they never wondered about the origins of magic? Why are they even here if not to learn all there is to know about magic?

“Very good questions, but this is Defence Against the Dark Arts, not Magical Theory class, Mr. Potter.” Professor Quirrell’s voice drips across the silence, heavy and silken. Perhaps amused.

Taken aback, Harry tilts his head, contemplating the new information. “Excuse me, Professor, but is there a Magical Theory class? I didn’t see such a subject being offered at Hogwarts, not even as an elective.”

“It is offered...as an extra-curricular class. It used to be a core subject...five decades ago, if I’m not mistaken. Many subjects were cut out of the curriculum due to low budget. Useful subjects like Warding, Enchanting, Basic Healing, and many others.”

Thin smile, thick imputation. Emphasis on reasons and underlying reasoning. Ah. Politics again.
Harry isn’t certain how politics relate to education in this case, but he will be researching this…

travesty. In depth. Professor Quirrell’s smile stretches thinner, as if he can read the decision in his

eyes, and he nods.

“I will answer your questions because it is criminal to leave you so woefully ignorant. What we

have is an inner magical system. It is similar to other body systems in the sense that it can be reactive

to emotional stimuli, meaning it can act independently on occasions of intense emotion, but otherwise
dissimilar in the sense that it needs to be developed, meaning it can be trained unlike, for example,
the circulatory system. It is an extra system that enhances the body, not one that performs specific
functions to sustain it.”

A noise of distress falls from Padma’s lips. Harry can’t blame her. A revelation of this magnitude has

left him speechless.

“What this means is that we are all born with equal capability for magical prowess. We are not born

with magic. We are born with the tool to harness magic. The difference lies in how one develops it.
Magic is a type of energy, and it is all around us. A small amount of that energy naturally circulates
within our system because it is designed to do so. Magical healing and medicinal potions are
ineffective on muggles because they lack the system to process them.”

How his brows furrow, the way his posture becomes rigid, the miniscule pause in his speech—they
all imply discrimination. So the professor is prejudiced against muggles as well as purebloods. Harry
is inclined to believe he is the type of person who hates everyone equally.

“There are points in the body where the magic passes through that correspond to specific branches of
magic.”

A keen glance at Michael reveals the professor has him blacklisted and will be using the boy as a

guinea pig in future lessons.

“Since Mr. Corner mentioned curses, most offensive magic is molded at the base of the spine. It
requires years of study and practice to develop even one point of the system, and that is the reason
great wizards and witches choose to specialize in one type of magic instead of succumbing to
mediocre generalization. Only exceptional and very dedicated individuals could master more than
one branch of magic in their entire lifetime.”

Dark, assessing eyes scrutinize him. Harry’s mouth clamps down on itself, but his eyes are full of
us. We have chocolate chip cookies.

“The development of our magical system is also very dangerous without supervision at first. If one
forces the points past their limits, they will become strained, damaged, and in some severe cases…
destroyed. Building flexibility is a slow process that demands one start at the very bottom. Hence, no
curses in this year, Mr. Corner.”

Ah, yes. Michael has definitely earned himself a place on the professor’s bad side.

“How much one is able to perceive of that process depends on their connection and sensitivity to the
presence of their magical system. If, for example, you have practiced magic consciously and
regularly since early years, then it is easier to follow your progress. Most children simply mimic what
the teachers show in class without being aware of the subtle changes inside their body—but those do
happen. Make no mistake, you are gaining knowledge and magical maturity. Exhibiting talent in one
branch of magic also denotes affinity, and you should pursue such aptitude.”
Again, that dark assessment. Harry swallows the tide of laughter that rises to his throat and weathers the imperceptible tremors.

“So, to conclude, magical puissance depends on the individual and how much of their life they are willing to devote to magic. You should be learning all of this in Magical Theory class, but I doubt you will.”

Professor Quirrell’s splenetic jab at the culprits behind their tampered education goes amiss in all the anarchy. A volcanic eruption of awe-struck delirium. Everyone is bursting with questions and trying to compare their notes in case they have missed anything. Harry smiles at the professor. A bright, thankful smile. He will never join his exclusive union, but he does like him.

“Thank you, Professor Quirrell. That was most illuminating.”

“Indeed, Mr. Potter.” His smile is the thinnest slice of praise. An ear-splitting bang then. A flash grenade silences the class. “Now, let us return to the relevant subject.”

Something has gone very, very wrong. The phrase has been repeating itself in his mind, looping circles around his sanity, each loop pressing just a little bit tighter, like a snake eating its own tail. Seven days now, seven days since the world has tilted out of its axis. Severus can’t pinpoint when, where, or even how, but he knows who is to blame.

Harry bloody Potter. Hogwarts’ rising prodigy. Filius’ golden egg. Magical Britain’s darling son. The Daily Prophet has even printed a special edition, raving about the return of their Savior mere hours after the welcoming feast—and Filius has the gall to pin the worthless rag to the staff room’s board of all places. With a permanent sticking charm. Severus glares at it, at the merry, mocking ink of its headline, black as the holes in his pupils. As the velvet sound creeping over his skin, hair-raising, sinister. Quirrell is laughing beside him, laughing at him, quietly, knowingly—and there is something very, very wrong with that wizard.

The door slides open, and Minerva walks inside, the last to come. Severus draws his robes around himself, crossing his arms and scowling at nothing and everything. Albus’ gaze encompasses all when the door closes, filling the room beyond its capacity, and Quirrell’s laughter dies an agonizing death at the light of that sky-blue. Severus smirks even as his hackles are raised higher by the wizard’s reaction. Suspicious… Quirrell is too…suspect.

“Thank you for coming. Shall we begin?”

A scoff axes Albus’ genial countenance, something between a sneer and a snapping of teeth, the advent of a goblin on the warpath. Severus stiffens, recognizes it in an instant despite not having heard it since the first wizarding blood war. Bloody hell. Filius will turn this meeting into a bloodbath. He can already feel the clangor of goblin-steel thudding in his ears. Just what Severus needs.

“Begin what, Albus? I told you before that I have no wish to participate in this foolish endeavor of yours. Safeguarding the Philosopher’s Stone and the Mirror of Erised in a castle full of children is madness. I’m not even going to entertain these ideas about…challenges.”

The final word is spat at Albus’ face. The way a wizard might spit in revulsion. The way goblins spit at someone’s feet to heighten the insult. And Albus sighs as if harangued by childish disobedience. That damned, obstinate, perpetually twinkling old fool. Deaf to the thundering tempo of war-drums in the distance. Severus, too, sighs. On his own head be it then.
“Hogwarts’ wards are among the oldest in existence, Filius—and I promised Nicolas the stone would be where it is safest. The children won’t even know it is here. Won’t you please reconsider?”

Half-truths, half-assurances, all that comes out of his mouth, spun with the subtlest web of admonition. Merlin knows how many of those Severus has endured over the years. Albus is a master of equivocation and guilt-trips, but there is a place and time for that, and now is not it. Filius is not indebted to the old wizard, owes him no fealty, no submission.

“Truly, Albus? Is that why you made that announcement to the whole school? To keep children ignorant? And why must we protect the stone? The Flamels have kept it safe for centuries. What changed? I notice you didn’t include the reason for the mirror’s presence either.”

A shadow of glaring edge, a tongue shaped like a blade. Impressed, morbidly amused, Severus watches the sweeping arc of Filius’ strike as it slices through the byssine texture of Albus’ shield.

“The announcement was merely a precaution, Filius. I gave the same warning about the Forbidden Forest. Children will think it was nothing more than a general warning about danger. As for the stone, there has already been an attempt to steal it. I was concerned about Nicolas’ safety if I returned the stone to him. But who would suspect it is at Hogwarts? It is the same for the mirror. Both will be out of the children’s reach.”

Albus’ counterattack is so finely chained, one silken link after another, that Severus applauds him even as he takes it apart and examines each colorful thread. Cornflower blue for disappointment. Electric blue for allocution. Powder blue for coercion. A colony of acromantula would be envious of his weaver’s skill.

“I hear nothing but your usual evasions, Albus. If you won’t reconsider, then we have nothing more to discuss.”

Filius’ irises are too black, his sclera too white, violence and something else, darker, calculating. Quicksilver wit, prescient. It says he has come prepared for this exact outcome and has made insurances in case words fail. Severus can see the moment Albus comes to the same conclusion. Alarm contorts the passive arrangement of his features, deepens the aged lines, grey ridging the skin around his eyes.

“Filius, please—”

“He’s right, Albus.”

What the—? Minerva—? Severus’ head whips around so fast that bones grind in his neck. This…this is unprecedented. Minerva, of all people… Albus reflects his bewilderment in the marginal widening of his eyes.

“Minerva…” His voice is tangible shock and betrayal.

And Minerva huffs. Huffs. All feline fury and displeasure. Severus is too overwhelmed to interpret that wicked twist on Quirrell’s mouth at her rebellion. Nor does he want to.

“Don’t give me that look, Albus. When was the last time you taught children? I reckon you have forgotten how they think. Tell them they can’t go somewhere, and they’ll go just to prove you wrong. Tell them it is also dangerous, and you make it sound like an adventure. I should know.”

A muffled growl of sodding Weasleys follows the end of her sentence, but there is fondness underneath her swearing. Severus grimaces. Wrangling Weasleys is a special kind of hell.
Albus steeples his fingers, blue eyes dismal over gold-rimmed glass. Forced to put the matter to a vote after such grandiose acts of dissension. Pomona is the first to feel the weight of his gaze, and she shifts in her seat, discomfited, wincing, dirt-stained nails scratching her cheek.

“My ‘Puffs will behave, and they never go anywhere alone, but Minerva has a point.”

Severus’ chin lifts in disdain. “Slytherin suffers neither imbeciles nor glory-seekers.”

Quirrell’s low-spoken *not without incentive* rouses a vapor of aggression. An exhalation of hot breath. A tic in Severus’ jaw. How *dare* that…that Ravenclaw-imposter?

“Very well. If you feel so strongly about it, I will deal with this myself. I certainly can’t force you to participate. Will that suffice?”

Two and a half negative votes tip the scales. Albus still has majority, but he’s not the type to accept half-victories. *Hubris*. A quality he shares with the Dark Lord. Severus bets that will be his downfall one day. Just like the Dark Lord.

“I wish you wouldn’t deal with this *at all*, Albus. If you knew what was best, you’d return the stone to Nicolas Flamel. We met once on the dueling circuit, you know. That man duels like the most vicious Horntail and twice as craftily. He could have *you* trussed up like a spring chicken and still have breath to laugh about it—and you should *know*. You apprenticed under him, didn’t you?”

A soft whisper of *did many things under him*, slyly insinuating, has Severus almost gaping, eyes bulging in their sockets. What the hell is wrong with Quirrell? Forget the talking-to-himself tendencies. Severus will need to ask Poppy to obliviate him because…Albus and sexual innuendo just…no. *Hell no*. Filius’ abrupt departure saves his remaining brain cells from self-destructing. Severus comes back to reality just in time to witness Minerva’s similar exit.

“I agree with Filius.” And she’s gone…Quirrell’s eyes mapping the slow sway of her hips as she goes.

Severus’ brain shuts down. Again. This…this is just not happening. It takes even longer for his brain to resume some of the lost function after the second breakdown. He barely registers the sickening drawl of Quirrell’s voice as he speaks up for the first time.

“I would be happy to assist, Headmaster.”

It rattles him, the way Quirrell enunciates Albus’ title, near hissing, dipped in eldritch undertones, eerily reminiscent of parseltongue.

And Albus *smiles*. Unaffected. “Thank you, Quirinus.”

The door closes behind Quirrell, and Severus’ body sags into Pomona’s recently vacated seat. He hasn’t even noticed her leaving in the midst of his mental crisis. Rubbing his temples, he breathes in the blessed silence, willing this memory into the deepest crannies of his mind.

“What did you think, Severus?”

*Goddamn you, Albus.* Fed up, utterly spent, his lids rise by a margin, merely enough to skewer Albus with his glare.

Instead of taking offence at the sarcastic synopsis, or taking the hint to leave things be, Albus gives him *that* smile. “Everything.”

*A*. So this is how Albus expresses that he has no more patience for those beneath him. No wonder Severus hasn’t been the recipient of this smile before—he never pushes the old wizard past his limits, only puts up a token defiance. Quirrell must be the true face of evil to earn it with one sentence. Fudge has probably seen it so many times that he must now think it is Albus’ real smile.

“Filius never committed to your plan. I don’t know why you expected another result now. If Minerva supported you, he might have eventually caved, but seeing as quite the opposite happened…” A shrug of his shoulders, uncaring. Albus is not the only one to have run out of patience. Severus’ meager reserves have been exhausted since that doomsday meeting in the Apothecary. “Pomona is always so…*Hufflepuff*. She will side with her colleagues nine times out of ten.” There. The end of it. Time to go raid Miner—

“And Quirinus?”

*May all your brother’s goats chase you to hell, Albus.* “What about Quirrell?” Shoulders squared back, head held high, defensive, as a spitting cobra flares its hood.

“You must have noticed there is something…not right with him.”

His pause is rife with foreboding, coaxing as it is supercilious. Albus *knows what is not right*. He bloody well knows—and is taunting him with the knowledge.

“Not right is *right*.” More snarling than speaking, eyes narrow, thin, serpentine slits. “But with him, or about him?”

“What do you mean, my boy?” Saccharine, insouciance, *cajoling*. The effect isn’t the same with the way Albus sweetens the words, but it *is* there—the *smile*, the mockery, the provocation.

“Don’t patronize me, Albus.” A lash of rage hot and sharp on his tongue. “The man changes personalities faster than Gilderoy Lockhart changes robes. He was a timid wizard of some talent before he took that sabbatical, then he comes back a stuttering mess with an obsession for turbans, and now…he teaches the Dark Arts better than I would.” Rage hotter, sharper. That *pretender*…he *dares*… It should have been *his*. He should have been teaching—

“He’s either suffering from multiple personality disorder or he’s not alone in his body.” Severus hurls all the rage at the old fool who has denied him *again*. And again. And again. “I’m inclined to believe it is the latter.”


And Severus explodes. Wrenching himself out of the chair, pacing, back and forth, like the caged animal he is. *Frothing* with rage. “No. No, you clearly *don’t see*. I told you before—I told you and you did *nothing*.”

“If this is about Har—”

“Of course it is about Potter. *It is always about Potter*. All of this, *this*… Filius, Minerva, Quirrell—it all started when *he* showed up. Don’t you see?”

A sigh is all his rage amounts to—and the sky falling down in haunted eyes. “What do you want me to do, Severus? Accuse the boy of being the second coming of Voldemort?”
“Don’t say his name!”

“My boy—”

“No, Albus, not today.”

Severus is done. What more can he say? What more must he do? Half his soul seduced by the Serpent, half bartered to the Weaver, all of it taken with the dead. Nothing for the living.

“Perhaps it would be best if we left this discussion for another day.”

Diplomatic to the bitter end. Sacrosanct. Fatalism is Albus’ way. Stalling, waiting, hoping for fate to unfold the way it is written in the stars. Severus’ way is survival.

“Remember that I warned you, Albus. In ten years, maybe twenty, when you end up with another Dark Lord, and you’re too weak to fight, remember.” Severus lets the sky fall. All there is left to say in his stare. “Because I won’t be there.”

His allegiance has always been to the dead.
Filius never forgets his grandsire’s words, for goblins are sparse in affection through words. Lessons are taught through blood and steel and gold. *Bare your teeth and blade. Strike while the iron is hot. Lies are human and truth is gold.* He may live with wizards, dine with wizards, teach with wizards, but he never forgets the goblin way of life. He has been born as one, raised as one, and he will die as one. Blood breeds true. Always has, always will. Albus has never understood that, and Filius will never apologize for it.

“Ah, Filius. Thank you for coming.”

Artificially complaisant, and exactly the reason they will never see eye to eye. Sitting behind his desk, various knickknacks glinting smoky-silver and whirring softly, Albus beckons him to have a seat, as if this is a social visit.

“Did you expect otherwise?”

Filius bares his teeth as he hops onto the chair, and Albus flinches.

“Well, after our recent…altercation, I wasn’t sure how receptive to a conversation you would be.”

The tone of the conversation is set then, aligned with their vocal tone, doomed from the beginning. Albus will cajole. Filius will cut. Nothing will change.

“Spare me the wounded feelings act, Albus. I’m old enough to see through that, and you’re old enough to know better than to even try. Save it for Severus. Merlin knows how that boy has the patience for it, but he does.”

A grimace shadows Albus’ face. “Yes, well… Tea?”

“Let us not dance around the subject, Albus.” Shaking his head, Filius brings out his flask of scotch and pours a generous amount into the cup of bland tea. “You want to know all there is to know about Harry Potter. You always want to know everything, and even worse, you expect to be told everything, but rarely return the courtesy. I wonder if your grave will be deep enough for all your secrets.”

“That was uncalled for, Filius.” Albus’ skin grows ashen, pale as his admonition.

“Was it?” Filius smiles, mirth beneath a gnashing of teeth. “Just ask your questions, Albus. I’m not here to entertain your penchant for emotional manipulation.”

If he is insulted, Albus hides it well, but the truth remains plain to see. Blue eyes gleam behind the half-spectacles perched low on the crook of his nose as he dispenses with the fake pleasantries. Curiosity burns too hot inside him to keep playing a losing game. Albus wants to know more than he cares to control the pace for once.

“What happened, Filius? What happened to the sweet boy I remember? He was full of James’ mischief, tugging at my beard every time I visited. And now…his smiles are sharp enough to draw blood.”

His expression is solemn, gone dark with focus, an antithesis to the brightness of his robes. Filius feels no pity when he tells him.
“He grew up. What did you expect with where you left him, Albus? Don’t even try to deny it. You knew very well what life he’d have in that house.”

Albus nods, still solemn, still curious. “But that is not all, is it? It can’t be.”

No shame in that man. Disgusted, Filius barely restrains the growl building in his chest. “No. No, it isn’t.” The words are ground out jagged and feral. “But you never cared to find out before, did you? You only care when you are forced to face your mistakes.”

A sigh deluges the space between them, as if Filius is being unnecessarily difficult, spiteful for the mere sake of it.

“Filius, please. I only want to understand.”

_Ha!_ If only. “And what will you do when you understand? Will you leave that boy be?” Nothing comes forward, and Filius scoffs. “I thought so.” A harsh _tsk_ grazes the flesh of his tongue. “I will tell you, Albus, but not because you asked. I will tell you because I owe it to Lily.”

Albus startles at that, brows slightly knit. It baffles Filius, incenses him. Is he truly so ignorant as to have missed how deep the bond between master and apprentice runs? Minerva must have been terribly cheated with her choice in mentor. _Lily_…the light of his eyes. Filius gave her _everything_, everything and more. He would have taken care of the light of her life, too…if he could, if it wouldn’t have incited another war. A goblin raising the wizarding hero. _Psah!_ The earth would have cried blood. And he would have still done it, but no child should be raised in bloodshed.

“She didn’t die for you to unmake her sacrifice in your self-righteous quest to erase all magic that doesn’t cater to your sensibilities. Lily didn’t think you’d understand, you know. That’s why she never told you or James what she did.” Wrath in his eyes, blood and fire on the altar of forgotten magic. “And she was right.”

A gasp echoes, faint with dawning horror. “You can’t mean she—she turned to the Dark Arts?”

Filius can see revulsion in the white of Albus’ pallor, in the arctic blue of his eyes, frozen in the grip of that realization. That conniving hypocrite!

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake. This isn’t the political arena, Albus. Magic is magic. Don’t bother to tell me otherwise. You know my views very well, even if you never agreed with them. They don’t suit your political agenda, do they? They clash with your fanatic need for redemption. Why blame the people when you can blame the magic?” _How many murderers have you pardoned, Albus? How many walk free to terrorize the innocent once more because of you?_ Throwing his head back, Filius downs his cup and lets the fire burn away the taste of _his_ revulsion. “But enough. I’m not going to argue with a politician. I will talk to a wizard, if you can find it in yourself to be one for an hour. Will you?”

Warily, Albus stares at him, perhaps regretting he ever asked. “I’m sorry, Filius, but…the Lily I knew would never turn to such foul magic.”

_Foul_, he says! And his grandsire’s words roar in his ears. _Beware the pride of humans. Beware their folly!_ Filius draws breath deep inside his lungs, then exhales, and again. “You didn’t know Lily _Evans_, Albus. You knew Lily _Potter_, and that is how she liked it.” Albus opens his mouth, but Filius’ glare cuts him off before he can spew more nonsense. “Remember. Did you ever interact with Lily before her marriage to James?”

Humming, Albus pulls at the middle of his beard, skin creasing above his brows, filaments of
memory resurfaced. “She was friends with Severus, even as a Gryffindor. It warmed my heart to see
their friendship hold strong in the face of adversity. Until that day, of course.”

The last sentence carries the gravity of some cataclysmic disaster.

Filius’ stare turns droll. “And what did you think happened that day? Did you think Lily threw away
years of friendship because of a common slur? That she didn’t know why Severus turned on her?
That she couldn’t forgive an insult spoken in blind anger and humiliation?”

A slow blink. Albus’ jaw slackens, mouth falling ajar, trying and failing to reconcile the past. “She
knew? But then…why?”

“Because she had to.” Firm, unchallenged, a statement. “Severus was well on his way down a road
that would make her a target. Consorting with children of Death Eaters, some of them even marked
while still in school. Muggleborns were hunted down and slaughtered like animals back then. Did
you forget that? Or perhaps you don’t want to remember what your redeemed boy has done in his
youth?” One vicious curl of lips, thinly satisfied. “Lily did the smart thing and took the excuse when
it fell into her lap. She did what she had to, and good on her.”

All color flees Albus’ face. He swallows once, twice, and when he speaks his voice has regressed to
raw whispering. “Does Severus know that?”

Filius’ smile becomes sardonic. “No.” He can’t help but laugh as Albus’ body loosens in relief.
“Don’t worry, Albus. He’s still leashed to her memory.”

Disappointment stares back at Filius, so potent, so perfect. Merlin forbid Albus gives in to ugly
emotions. Too dignified for anger, is he? Filius’ laughter intensifies until he’s wiping off tears.

“Must you make me the villain in everything, Filius? Can’t I simply care for Severus’ psyche?”

“You can.” But you don’t is loud and clear. Dragging his thumb under his eyes, shaking with light
spasms, Filius sighs. There are other things as well. I could speak about how brilliant, how shrewd
that woman was for hours, but my point is made. You didn’t know Lily.”

Albus, too, sighs. “And I regret that I didn’t.”

“It is too late for regrets.” Bitter, gaze narrowing, he snorts. “But if you truly mean it, then you will
leave her boy alone after you know.” Again, nothing comes forward, not that Filius expects
otherwise. Goblins could tunnel that mountain forever without making headway. Even the truth
might not move it. “She came to me after you served her that bogus prophecy.”

“It wasn’t—”

“Oh, it was.” Filius quells him a look. “Until it wasn’t. Self-fulfilling prophesies and all that rubbish.
That’s what happens when you meddle with the tongue of seers, but believe what you will. What is
done is done.” On that, they can both agree, maybe the only thing they ever will. “Lily asked for my
help—and I helped her. Born as the seventh month dies, she said. On the eve of Lughnasadh. So I
spoke to her about the old blood rituals on days of power.”

Porcelain shatters and pierces weak flesh, blood welling, dripping sluggishly. Albus’ fingers close
around the pieces of his broken cup, opening the cuts wider, deeper. A soft trill blazes. Fawkes lands
on the edge of the desk, fire-feathered head tilting over Albus’ fingers, crystalline tears sealing the
wounds. Albus smiles, strokes the Phoenix’s plumage, his smile tremulous, showing his true age.

“Oh, Filius. How could you? She didn’t—”
“She did.” It is emphatic and beyond reproach. Filius has left his patience outside Albus’ office—he’s certainly not going to retrieve it now. Albus can go hang his disappointment next to his delusion. “Don’t give me that look, Albus. Ritualistic birth is an ancient, sacred custom, and placental blood is one of the purest magical substances. It has become obsolete these days, rarely practiced even by the old pureblood families, but the hidden barrows still swell with magic. Witches have forgotten—but the magic remembers.”

Another trill, softer, lugubrious. Albus weeps silent tears, as if mourning the loss of innocence. Despondent, overcome with grief. Filius wonders who will mourn Albus’ loss if he were to accidentally meet his end at the edge of an axe. Probably too many sycophants to be worth the trouble of staging an accident. And that poor Phoenix… This is why creatures born with deep emotional resonance should never bond to wizards. To be enslaved to the whims of an overemotional schemer living in the past...

Gingerly, Albus dries his eyes, sighing even as he frowns. “I thought she gave birth at St. Mungo’s. I remember that. There was an Order meeting that day, and James rushed out in a hurry when the floo call came. Frank had left before him, if I recall correctly.”

“Alice Longbottom did give birth at St. Mungo’s, but Lily was admitted after the birth. No one knows because Sirius memory charmed the hospital staff, and James arrived after it was over.”

Shock jolts Albus out of his morose state. “Sirius Black?”

Filius smiles wryly. “Why did you think Lily named him godfather? For his stellar life choices and deep sense of responsibility?”

Albus’ mouth imitates the result of a botched human-to-goldfish transfiguration. “Well… I did wonder.”

“As most did, but no. Sirius was there during the birth. He was a Black, and Black blood breeds true.” A stab of regret twists like a knife deep in his abdomen. That boy… Betrayed by his own blood, devoured by the sins of his forefathers. Filius curses the Black madness. Blood will always win in the end. “Although, I don’t think he was ever the same after that day. Poor boy kept muttering about the Old Gods and calling Harry godling when only Lily was around.”

Incredulity lines Albus’ features, shaping them into something derisive. “The Old Gods, Filius? Surely you won’t have me believe in such myths?”

“You believe in prophecies spoken by drunken seers, Albus.” Taunt for taunt. “But no, I don’t believe in ancient gods. I believe in sentient magic being tied to the mother’s will and given pure purpose. Calling to the Mother Goddess and the Sun God is part of the ritual as it was done in the old days, but more symbolic than invocation. If you desire proof though, all you have to do is look at what remains of the ritual.” Blank incomprehension is all he receives. Filius clicks his tongue, irritated, questioning if Albus is being deliberately obtuse. “The boy’s scar, Albus.”

Albus stills, motion and breath suspended, eyes too blue, too disbelieving, even when bludgeoned with clear-cut evidence. “Sæwelō… the rune of the Sun.”

A sigh tumbles out of Filius’ throat. “You thought the Killing Curse gave it form?”

Rigidly, he nods. “I…yes. What else could it have been?”

Unbelievable… “Runes are associated with rituals, Albus. Not Curses. A rune-scar on Samhain should have clued you in.”
Contemplation creeps into that doubtful blue. “I had not taken Samhain into consideration.”

“Oh, obviously.” Blunt, mordant, disguising nothing.

It falls on silk-clogged ears.

“I thought it was love—the love of a mother’s sacrifice.” Albus sighs heavily, wearily, trapped in his own web of fallacy, unwilling to escape.

“You haven’t listened to a single word I’ve said, have you?” Filius shakes his head as he refills his cup with scotch, forgoing tea entirely. “It was love, Albus. Blood-bonded, yes, but a mother’s love still. The ritual would not have taken if the intentions weren’t pure.”

“I see.” Quiet, nearly inaudible, unseeing.

“Do you?” Filius takes one long draught of his drink, fire gliding down his throat to churn in a pit low in his stomach, and eyes him dubiously. “Because your expression tells me you’d rather forget you ever heard this.”

Albus stares at the liquid amber in his cup as if it holds the answer to his prayers. “I can’t change the past, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it, Filius.”

If this is Albus’ reaction to an innocuous blood ritual, Filius doesn’t have much hope for what will follow. Hope for Harry’s sake. Albus deserves every single slash of agony, and Filius will relish being the hand of the Furies.

“Nobody asked you to like it, Albus. Just to accept what was done and leave it be.”

“It still doesn’t explain what has happened to the boy. Unless there is more to this…blood magic I’m not yet aware of?”

The small pause, how he stigmatizes that word, the way his eyes cloud with odium—Filius sees them all. And he remembers his grandsire’s words. Let slip the dogs of war.

*Their hands grip their weapons, fingernails black-smoked, metal blood-rusted. They smile and they die, and in their death-smiles, the immortalization of victory. Eagerness enough—enough to rename and reshape what is no glory.*

Goblin rebellions are waged on blood.

Filius smiles, sharp as only goblin-wrought steel can be. “Of course there is. Blood magic alone would not have been enough. But if you add soul magic?”

Blood drains under his skin. Wide eyes bore into Filius’, anguished, dreading. Pale hoarfrost, translucent fear. “Soul magic? Filius…you can’t mean…”

“Oh, don’t play the fool, Albus. I was there that night, you know.”

Albus is choking on gelid air. Filius can feel nothing—but he can hear the frost filling Albus’ mouth and rushing deep down his throat.

“Lily wrote in our linked journal when Voldemort came for them. Two sentences were all she managed: *He’s here. Please... And I knew.*”

Freezing deeper. He smiles and shivers with the satisfaction of that deeper.
“I arrived just in time to catch Hagrid leaving with the boy, so I put a tracking charm on the motorcycle. Once it stopped moving, I cloaked myself in silencing and disillusioning charms, and apparated. I came in time to see you leave him on that muggle doorstep like a bottle of milk—and I heard you, Albus.”

Something cracks beneath the ice. Terrible and beautiful and hatched for bloodlust. It wraps around Filius’ tongue with absolute precision. Delicately, viciously.

“Scars are useful things, aren’t they? No need to heal them, now do we? Not that you could, mind you, but you didn’t even try. Because you knew, didn’t you?”

It seeps into the bloodless skin of Albus’ face, glaciating the brittle framework of bone beneath. Cold heat and tissue being frostbitten, layer after layer after layer. He is numb through that biting. Slowly dying.

“How…?” A rough croak, voice gone. Phoenix song melts the chill clinging to the walls of Albus’ throat, and his voice returns. “How did you know?”

“My grandsire is Agnar, Manager of the Egyptian branch of Gringotts. Soul magic is their bread and butter there. I knew what lay inside that scar before I even cast the detection spell. Soul magic leaves potent traces, and the boy was bathed in it.”

Albus’ silence is confirmation enough—but still not enough. Filius will have his pound of flesh on that boy’s behalf come hell or high water.

“Nothing to say? Good. Because I have much to say to you.” Growling, raw-throated fury. “You didn’t even put one warming charm on the boy, Albus. Or an animal repelling ward. You irresponsible, self-serving bakraut.”

The goblin curse goes deep—but not deep enough. Despite Albus’ knowledge of the goblin language. It is given for blood-spillers, kin-slayers. What does he know of blood-bonds? He who reviles the blood-rites.

“I—I didn’t think…” Albus rears back, pain-stricken, a scintilla of shame inside his eyes at long last. Not even Fawkes’ melodic soothe-singing can chase the guilt away.

“No, you didn’t. You didn’t do a lot of things, Albus.”

“What could I have done, Filius?” Blue flecked with opaline wet, beseeching dimly, desperately. “If you know, tell me.”

“About the soul-shard? Nothing. Lily’s magic had that well under control.” Unmoved, Filius stares at him hard. “But about the boy? You could have done so much… I don’t even know where to start. Leaving him on that muggle doorstep was your greatest mistake, and the one you have to blame for what happened.”

Albus takes a fortifying breath. “What do you mean?” Cautious now, maybe finally aware of his ignorance.


Whatever Albus expected to hear…this is not it.

“Surely not…they were his family.” He mumbles the words, distraught, denying them when it is obvious he wants to believe them. Quietly, imploringly. “I admit I…suspected he might not have an
“He was abused.” Filius’ stare hardens into titanium. Merciless, implacable. “He was treated so horribly that the blood magic chose to ally itself with the soul-shard and complete the half-formed bond. Do you understand, Albus? A piece of Voldemort’s soul was preferable to the life he lived with those muggles.”

It strikes him with the swiftness of a heart attack—cold sweat and spasms, breathing short and erratic, horror clotting inside blocked arteries, heart muscle deprived of oxygen-rich blood. A stuttering is all that comes forth. “What…? No. No, that…that can’t be…”

Filius sits unmoved, calmly sipping his scotch. “It can, and it did.”

And all the while Albus unravels. “How? That…shouldn’t have been possible. I have been trying to find a way to separate them for years, Filius. Years…and nothing. I’ve found nothing.”

“Because you know nothing. What do you know of soul magic, Albus? You can’t bear to even speak about it without denouncing all that it is.” Filius’ lip curls, contempt enameled on gritted teeth. “The Killing Curse? The Horcrux? Tell me, what more do you know of soul magic?”

Flinching, Albus recoils in repugnance. “What more is there, Filius? It is a sickening branch of magic. One that should not exist.”

“The Fidelius Charm is soul magic, Albus. The Animagus transformation is soul magic. The presence detection charm is soul magic.”

With each piece of magic punctuated, Albus’ denial is being chiseled away, little by little. Pity inundates Filius’ soul. For the untaught children. Headmaster of Hogwarts and yet so unworldly. Rowena must be turning in her grave.

“You’re a blind fool. You close your eyes to everything that contradicts your fallible perceptions of morality. That you even attach morals to magic is where your ignorance shows. But we’ll never agree on that, so I’ll tell you what I know of soul magic.”

Albus leans forward, riveted as he is revolted.

“Harry is not the first living Horcrux. Not even the second, or the third. There have been numerous over the centuries.” Filius barks out a laugh at the instant blanching of Albus’ complexion, mirth guttural and long-lived. “Goblins keep records for inheritance disputes. Wizards and witches have been trying to cheat death for a long time, but they can never cheat goblins. You’d be surprised to know just how many have tried to claim their vaults after their supposed deaths.”

Bewilderment avalanches across wan skin. Albus opens and closes his mouth, bereft of words. Seconds, maybe even minutes, pass. And then, “What? But…but that is absurd. It would be known were that the case.”

Again, Filius laughs. “Goblins can keep secrets better than graves, Albus. Customer confidentiality and all that. But if you want known examples… The Greeks were very fond of soul magic, almost as much as the Egyptians. You should have heard of Orpheus and Eurydice.”

Albus is staring at him with equal doses of dismay and skepticism, one small frown of brows and lips. “The muggle tale? Myths about gods again, Filius?”

Resisting every step of the way. Filius longs for his axe, the siren song of its steel calling for this fool’s blood. Over and over.
“There is a grain of truth in every myth, Albus.” Slow articulation, patronizing. “That couple was so…in love that they took their vows literally. Till death do us part gains another meaning when you exchange pieces of your soul. The issue was that when soul magic acquired vile connotations after Herpo’s atrocities came to be worldwide known, the Greek Council of the time destroyed all accounts of soul magic and disguised most cases as muggle mythos. But records still exist deep in the magical Ancient Library of Alexandria, if you search through the right channels. Only the muggle part was lost, as you well know.”

Dark, oppressive silence looms over Albus’ bowed head, casting shadow and disquietude. An omen of grim tidings, ill-fated things to come. Albus ages ten thousand days in ten seconds.

He parts his mouth, stops to swallow, then begins again. “If you are right…if it is as you say, then Harry is lost as I feared.”

Scowling, Filius surveys him heatedly. “Lost? What foolishness are you on about now, Albus?”

“He, his soul. His soul was…lost. That boy is not Harry Potter, but Voldemort reborn.”

There is such absolutism in his tone, such soi-disant dogma, that Filius curses him to the ends of the netherworld.

“Sweet Circe’s tits... Were you not listening again, Albus?” Will you ever listen? “Lily’s magic would not have allowed Voldemort’s soul to take over her son’s body. It is exactly why I did nothing more than place some protective charms on the boy and let the matter be. I theorized that the blood magic would eventually reject the soul-shard, once it was running at full power again. Reflecting that Killing Curse had almost depleted it, but the magic was still active in the boy’s blood. It should have vanished if its purpose had been fulfilled.”

Filius spears him with his most savage glare when Albus makes to interrupt. “Listen, Albus, and listen well. In cases of living soul anchors, there have been four possibilities documented. The first is that the bond is too weak for the soul-shard and the vessel to ever have contact. The second is that the soul-shard takes over the vessel completely. The third is that the vessel rejects the soul-shard, but most cases don’t survive the process. And the fourth is that the soul-shard and the vessel’s soul merge. The last case is the rarest and most complicated.”

Albus’ mouth is locked in a soundless gasp, fist tight around his beard, when Filius pauses to hydrate his throat.

“I theorized on Harry’s case because I had never heard of soul magic interacting with blood magic before. But I have read about cases of soul-merging. It is usually an even mix, unless one soul is infinitely more dominant than the other. A sixty-year-old wizard of prodigious intellect, with a fully developed, strong-willed personality, at the pinnacle of magical maturity would be considered exactly that. I’m not sure when the merge occurred, but it should have been during the boy’s early years. Harry didn’t have the time or the right influences to develop a solid personality yet. And so their soul-merging was unbalanced.”

Albus does gasp then, full of breath and petrified. “So it is Voldemort.”

“No, you—you—” A relentless stream of goblin curses hooks on the tip of his tongue. The few that escape color Albus’ skin. A rainbow of colors. He changes from green to white to red, and back to green at the end. For a man of…colorful taste, he doesn’t seem to appreciate it.

“What I meant is that what came out of the soul-merging was a person with the mentality of an adult but lacking the experience of being one. I can see Lily’s fire in him, and Riddle’s cunning, and some
parts that are a mixture of both. What I don’t see is Voldemort’s madness, or his reckless power-lust, or his sadistic streak, and that is what matters. He’s still in the process of absorbing parts that were dormant until now. Still merging. Right now, he appears more as a precocious child than the adult he mentally is. Hence, I treat him as the former. I’m guessing that the process will become complete in a year or so.”

Filius’ eyes connect with Albus’, coal-black clashing with sky-blue, neither giving in, nor giving up. A battle of will and knowledge. Slowly, insidiously, Filius smiles.

“And when that happens, you can be sure that he will leave. Hogwarts loses its appeal after all its faults have been laid bare. Children can’t see them, but Harry will. Indoctrination is hard to miss when you’re not a malleable child.”

In the quiet of the aftermath, Albus is rendered helpless, stripped of weapons and dignity, lying wounded on the battlefield. His sole avenue is to retreat for now and fight another day. Gathering the pieces of his shattered pride, he admits defeat—but the war still rages.

“Are you certain, Filius?”

Filius drains his cup, glutted with the euphoric burn of victory. “About what? That he is not Voldemort reincarnated, or that he will become disenchanted with Hogwarts’ education?”

“Both.” Grave as the funereal knell.

_Only you, Albus_… Filius stretches his neck and sighs. If he stays, he may answer the sweet call of his axe. Hopping down from his chair, he gives Albus the answer he deserves. “As certain as I am that you’re a sanctimonious old meddler.”

“Filius, please.” Albus takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes as if asking for patience, and Filius scoffs.

“You can plead all you want, but the fact remains. You just can’t leave things be. I told you what you wanted to know, but I still doubt you _listened_. You _will_ never _listen_. “It doesn’t matter. Do what you must, Albus, and we will do the same.”

Albus gazes at him as he frowns, bemused. “We?”

“Minerva contacted Nicolas Flamel after your cavalier disregard of our concerns. He wrote back to say he will be coming to Hogwarts once his current project is stabilized. He also apologized for the delay, but the project is still quite delicate and volatile. Make of that what you will. Good day, Albus.”

Once outside, Filius chortles. Minerva will be amused when she sees this in the pensieve. _Albus’ face_… Nicolas Flamel must be _something else_ indeed.
Minerva comes out of Filius’ pensieve the tiniest bit amused but mostly pensive. Falling back into the padded armchair near the fireplace, she nurses her drink as she deliberates quietly. What will it mean for Harry now that Albus knows? What will the future bring for that brilliant boy when he, too, knows? And he will know soon, perhaps sooner than Filius realizes. Just this morning in class…that smooth flick of wrist, that sinuous flow of magic. She remembers that beautiful morphing signature. Transfiguration, like all fields of magic, is taught with exact, clear wand motions at first. Personalization follows naturally when one becomes accustomed to how the magic should be shaped, at least for minor transfigurations. Minerva herself doesn’t bother much with wand movement outside of giving examples in class. For Harry to possess such instinctive understanding… James would have been proud, even if its origin whispers Tom Riddle.

She sips at her scotch, seeing elegant hands in the fire, skin-felt, sinful sensation in the lapping red tongues. A pleasure of the past she can never eschew. Filius is watching the shadowplay on her face when she turns her gaze on him.

“Are you certain it was wise to reveal this much, Filius? Albus loves his secrets, but he might still share small parts if he feels he must.”

“Oh, but didn’t you see, Minerva? He spilled blood in front of me.” His smile is nefarious, satiated as the bloodhound after the hunt. “I warned you about that once.”

*Never spill blood in front of a goblin you don’t trust.* The words flash across her mind, fresh as the day they were spoken, their meaning more dangerous, blood-chilling now.

Perturbed, Minerva bites her lip. “I thought you meant it would be an insult or provocation…”

Filius throws his head back and howls with laughter. It booms in her ears, rich, undiluted sound, disproportional to such a small person.

“You…you thought I gave you…cultural advice? Oh…oh, Minerva.” His whole body is trembling with open mirth, black eyes glistening, fist hammering against his thigh.

Minerva waits for him to come down from his laughing fit, mildly annoyed but not taking offence. Goblins have an alien sense of humor when it relates to interspecies communication that often eludes her. Rubbing the back of his sleeve against his eyes, Filius lets out one last laugh, still shaking.

“There is no point in that. No goblin will care unless you share familial ties with one. Muggleborns have an alien sense of humor when it relates to interspecies communication that often eludes her. Rubbing the back of his sleeve against his eyes, Filius lets out one last laugh, still shaking.

“There is no point in that. No goblin will care unless you share familial ties with one. Muggleborns do try to be courteous every year, and goblins laugh about that sort of thing.” A brow rises drolly. “Do you expect to be treated per your customs when you meet foreign wizards and witches?”

Ah. When he puts it that way… Minerva sighs, far from appeased, but resigned to never fathom goblin behavior. She would at least make a token effort to meet halfway. “Well…no. So you mean that if goblins are greeted in their ways by wizards, they’re inwardly laughing about it?”

A casual wave of his hand, as if she’s missing the main point. Before she can ask what is so damned important about the cultural chasm between their races, Filius’ expression becomes sharp in the way only war-edged metal can be.

“There are centuries of bad blood between goblins and wizards, Minerva. The treaties we’ve signed are not worth the parchment they’re written on. Would you teach your culture to the enemy?” An
acidic spitting of truths. “Goblins are allowed no wands, and yet they can battle wizards on equal ground. Do you think they do that with simple swordplay?”

It is rhetoric, factual, and Minerva stays quiet, uncomfortable with the subject but acknowledging all the same.

“We have magic, Minerva, as all the other sentient races, but goblin magic is worked through blood and metal and runes. Subtle magic, more innate, more intricate, nothing most wizards can replicate even if they tried for a hundred years.”

There is satisfaction in his voice, visceral and old-forged and full of pride. She swallows the lump in her throat, skin rough with gooseflesh, suddenly worried for Albus.

“What did you do, Filius?” Low, unnerved, barely a murmur. The stone-sculpted lines around Filius’ eyes soften at the fragility of the sound.

“Nothing so heinous.” A half-smile, soothing, alleviating her fears. “I merely transferred the secrecy bond my grandsire placed on me. All goblins are bound by blood to keep Gringotts’ secrets. Fawkes realized it and tried to halt the process, but he was too late in closing the wounds. Phoenixes are very sensitive to the fluctuations of magic, you know. Albus would have taken notice normally, I should like to think, but he was too distraught at the time to recognize such faint magical flow. I didn’t cast something new that would burn into his senses, simply extended an existing one.”

Minerva smiles even as she frowns, half-relieved, half-confused. “I don’t understand. How does that work? You were able to speak about it.”

Nodding, he brightens, his smile beaming as when he imparts clever pieces of magic to his students. “The original binding is based on interlaced rune arrays, complicated, tricky work, I’ll tell you. But what I did? Blood and word. I didn’t give Albus the word. If he attempts to share what he heard without the password that frees his tongue, his mind will blank of all thought. It is quite ingenious, really. Not magic that hurts the one bonded, but magic that protects the secret. It is done so no one can pry into Gringotts’ secrets if they capture goblins during wartime.”

That allays one of her concerns. “Still…was it wise to tell him all that?”

“Would you prefer he held onto his assumptions and cooked up some far-fetched scheme to martyr the boy for sheltering Voldemort’s soul?” Anger overlays disgust, thick inflection, smeared with the guttural tones of goblin accent. “Because you know that’s exactly what would have happened. Albus will never stain his hands with blood, oh, no. He will do much worse than a merciful killing if he thinks he must. At least now, there’s a small chance he’ll just observe instead of interfering.” His stare pierces her with the keenness of his mixed emotions. “You know him better than I do, Minerva. Tell me I’m wrong if you think so.”

“No, you’re right.” It pains her to admit Albus’ failings, maybe more than her own—because half of them are complicit to his. Minerva can’t help but agonize over which belong to her and which are another consequence of placing her trust in him. He shouldn’t have led her down this path of regret. Mistakes are to be made and repented by one’s own hand.

“Albus can’t abide such magic. Maybe now he’ll see Harry as Tom Riddle’s second chance and not Voldemort’s Trojan horse. We can only hope he’ll believe what you said.” She only half-believes her own hope. Poison-green reflects in Filius’ eyes as she holds him under her displeasure. “This… feud between you two has gone on for long enough that he might discard your theory on principle alone, Filius.”
Wearily, Filius sighs, but doesn’t deny the possibility. “He’s not as unlearned as I made him out to be, Minerva. He knows, vaguely, but he does. Albus chooses not to believe, not to go deeper into magics that revolt him even in research.” His stare blackens, iris indistinguishable from pupil, leaden with years upon years of unending battle. “Why do you think our feud, as you say, started?”

Twisting her glass, she takes one long sip, closes her eyes and thinks back on their first public argument. “I can’t be sure, but it began ten years ago?” Memory burns hotter than the alcohol inside the eyeless black. Wetting her lips, she chokes out the words, fire-licked on her tongue. “After…after that night. I assumed you blamed him for what happened to Lily and Harry.”

“Because he fed her that damned prophecy? Because he was careless enough that it reached Voldemort’s ears?” Filius clicks his teeth when she nods. “I could forgive that, Minerva. He’s an exceptional wizard, and so are his successes, and so too, his mistakes. I could have even forgiven him for Harry if he had apologized to the boy and let him be. He didn’t even have to tell him the sordid truth, just say he was bloody sorry for abandoning him to Lily’s vile sister and wish him the best from now on. But did he do that? No. Instead, he comes up with these challenges and baits for Merlin knows what. I can guarantee you nothing is coincidental in this sudden stone debacle. Harry will become involved if Albus has his way—and I won’t have that, Minerva.”

Challenge in his words, in the obsidian cut of his gaze. Her jaw firms, and she raises it proudly. “Neither will I.”

The corners of his mouth peel back, teeth bared, gleaming ferocity. Filius lifts his glass at the leonine pride of her posture—a silent pact between predators.

“What I couldn’t forgive was his overhaul of Hogwarts’ library and his censorship on my lessons. He secreted away many books that spoke about branches of magic he condemns, then he called me to his office and told me not to fill young ears with teachings about foul magics that would lead them astray.” Indignation is tar melting in the centers of his eyes, pulling her inside the hot-black-sticky trap. “Did you forget that?”

“I knew about the library, but not that he forbade you to even speak about certain branches of magic.” Maybe she should have put up more of a fight back then. James…too recent to even think straight, much less care about some books. Is this another failing she has to answer for? Her brows knit as she huffs, aggravated with herself, her blind loyalty, her careless handling of Hogwarts’ treasures. “Why would he go that far?”

“Oh, Minerva.” That quirk of Filius’ lips, bitter sufferance with a twist of pity, tells her everything. “He cut out whole subjects when he became Headmaster, subjects that had been taught at Hogwarts since its creation. Never mind that there were already other subjects cut before he even took office that he should have reinstated. I paid a steep price for the journal of an Arab scholar who visited Hogwarts mere years after its founding and documented what was taught and by whom. Rowena’s words alone made the gold I spent worth it.”

Stunned. Silence consumes her until she becomes one with the deprivation of knowledge. Why doesn’t she know? How could she not know? When she has searched so long, searched too long, all over Britain. Nothing of Godric’s words and mementos. Not even the Sword of Gryffindor which should still be in the school. Only the Sorting Hat. “What? I knew he cut some of the subjects we were taught in our years, but—but…I thought all accounts of the Founders were lost. There were more subjects taught before our time?”

“Yes.” Gentle now, as if she is something delicate, on the fringe of breaking. “Many scholars visited in its early years and left their written impressions, but their journals are either in private collections or in old family vaults. An auction comes by now and then, if you keep your ear to the ground. I
would have placed translated copies in the library, if Albus hadn’t vetoed it.”

Minerva takes refuge under that gentleness. Cutting subjects and citing low budget is one thing. She manages Hogwarts’ budget—she knows how sparse in money the school is. Overhauling the library is another, less understandable. Censoring a professor is…even less understandable. But forbidding knowledge of the Founders? “Why? Why would he—”

“Because the political factions in the Wizengamot are influenced by their ideas of magic. Because the Ministry would rather such knowledge go to the grave than deal with magic that can’t be monitored through wands. Because Albus is of the opinion that Dark Lords rise through those teachings. It is not his fault alone, Minerva. In fact, it started before his tenure. The Board of Governors and the Ministry of Magic endorse this prohibition. Hogwarts should be a law unto itself. Dippet was too swayed by public opinion and caved easily under political pressure. Albus just doesn’t want to enforce this because it doesn’t suit his political and moral views.”

Filius refills her glass, patting the back of her hand. Mechanically, she brings it to her lips, swallowing fire and ash and the taste of perfidy.

“When Hogwarts was first built, the Founders shared classes and subjects. Helga taught Herbs, Potions, Creatures, Astronomy, and Rituals. Salazar taught Charms, Runes, Numerology, Rituals, the Mind Arts, and Enchanting. Godric taught Transfiguration, Offensive and Defensive Magic, Creatures, Runes, and Warding. Rowena taught a little bit of everything to the lower years and Enchanting to the upper years. All of them taught Magical Theory and different branches of Healing. A Master Alchemist was persuaded to reside in the castle and teach Alchemy for two seasons out of every year.”

It all sounds...extraordinary. Oh, to read the words of the Founders, to experience their teachings even through second-hand accounts. Her heart beats faster. Her pulse leaps to her throat. Her blood sizzles in her veins. An apotheosis, that blazing crescendo.

“None of them talked about light or dark magic. Every field touched on many branches of magic without discrimination, whether they concerned the body, the mind, the blood, the soul. Helga spoke of the primal blood rituals. Salazar taught the graduating class of necromancy and death magic. Godric instructed them on battle magic that erased whole villages and shredded people to ribbons. Rowena talked of channeling the elements and causing natural catastrophes. Equal knowledge, equal opportunity. They were educators, not wardens of the students’ conscience. If one or two went bad, ten more would be there to stop them. Magic was magic in those days, as it should be.”

Simple, so simple, as if it is the answer to everything, and maybe it is. She, of all people, should know. Dark Lords will rise, and keep rising. It is human nature. Better to arm the children with knowledge they may never need than feed them to the ego of brilliant, twisted minds. Albus should know even better. “Is Albus truly so…?”

No description seems accurate, not quite prejudiced, not quite blind, but Filius nods with quiet certainty.

“He has a Mastery in Transfiguration, and yet he never attempted the Animagus transformation because he suspected it might be soul magic. It wasn’t that he didn’t have the time or the ability, but that he didn’t want to bare his soul and see all that it is. I simply confirmed this for him. You face your true self when you reach for your animal form. Your soul.” Heavy—his stare, his voice, the truth in a soul. “You know this, Minerva.”

She does…she remembers…cat-eyes in the dark, stalking and being stalked, feral intelligence, feral passion, that aloof, self-willed core, that lithe, sensual shifting. Things she knows, things she hides,
things she despises. Still, they are hers. “I—yes. It was as you say. But to think…”

“Don’t ask me why he holds such distaste for controversial magics because I wouldn’t know. I can only guess that something must have happened in his youth. Someone who knows magic as deeply as Albus doesn’t turn away from parts of it lightly.”

Filius shakes his head, sadly, full of that pity, and Minerva bites her tongue. What can she say when she harbors half of Albus’ mistakes as her own? If she’s been summer-burned, Albus has been consumed by an inferno, an obsession that burns for as long as he lives, until there is nothing left to burn, and even then still burn to mark the grave of what used to be.

Minerva sighs and finishes her scotch. “May I read that journal?”

And Filius’ usual cheer resurfaces. “Of course, Minerva.”

“—shouldn’t be spreading around… theories.”

“Stop regurgitating your father’s words, Mr. Malfoy. I assure you, I have heard it all from his own mouth and with more sophistication than you could ever hope to cultivate. If Lucius wishes to contest medically proven magical theory, then he can owl me. Or better yet, visit.”

“R-right. I will…relay your message, Professor.”

“You do that, Mr. Malfoy. Now run along.”

Harry turns around the corner, almost colliding with the red-faced Slytherin boy. Malfoy blinks, then bristles, eyes flashing with what he thinks is his most blistering glare. Silent, Harry appraises the boy’s poise. Little Draco has nothing on Mr. Tibbles. A wry smile falls over Harry’s visage as he steps to the side, moving on without a backward glance, making it the fifth time he has graced the boy with the silent-smiling treatment this week.

After the crushing humiliation of their first meeting, Malfoy has been trying to extort some reaction out of Harry that would cement a rivalry. Poor, misguided boy. Little Draco doesn’t know how lucky he is that Harry has more pressing issues on his mind than to consider entertaining him.

Another fruitless search in the library today. Professor Flitwick’s words are the sole proof he has of soul magic—and Harry has asked. The librarian, the Prefects, the upper years, everyone in his close vicinity but the professors. Carefully, of course, surreptitiously. A justified interest in the Killing Curse elicits long diatribes on the legality of the curse, its morality, its past use, its known casters, and a slew of other things with no relation to soul magic. Outrage and sympathy on behalf of his family as well. That, he could do without. The Killing Curse is the most known example, and yet nothing beyond its classification as an Unforgivable Curse.

There are only two avenues left now. He can either trust Professor Flitwick again, or wait until summer to scour Diagon Alley for information he might not even find. Information that might only exist in the seedier parts he has no inclination to venture into just yet. Harry has no illusions about his magical prowess and how he’ll fare against fully trained adults. It will be suicide, or much, much worse. Hagrid has been gruesomely graphic about what happens to children who lose their way into Knockturn Alley.

Two weeks until his monthly evaluation, fourteen days to reach a decision. He counts the days one by one. Harry needs answers, needs to know what is happening to him.

Nights of vivid, lucid dreams that fade with the last dark of dawn, impressions of things that should
be or shouldn’t be in unfamiliar places, that phantom hiss of parseltongue near the first-floor girls’ bathroom, those whisper-echoes in the back of his mind. Worst of all…the magic. Instinct guides his magic, shaping its flow, directing his motions. He knows how to cast the spells but not what comes before that. His classmates spend their time trying to learn the spells, and Harry trying to reverse-engineer them. It is laborious, complicated, slow-moving, mind-breaking. And he is exhausted.

They laud him as a magical prodigy. Harry can’t even laugh about it—because in a way, it is true. Deconstructing magic is infinitely more difficult than what they’re taught in class. By his understanding, he is not even learning the same things, not when he is altering wand motions, or skipping them altogether, forgoing incantations in some memorable cases, guessing the reaction of potion ingredients before mixing them. Professor Snape is near apoplectic when he raises his hand, and amusingly bipolar in his moods, only the harshest and softest tones of voice. No middle, no in-between.

His feet bring him to the Great Hall where the noise blares white and head-splitting in his ears. Harry is still counting the days as he joins his maybe-friends in the tight cluster of Ravenclaw students.

“Welcome back, oh fearless explorer. Found what you were looking for in the dense foliage of the library jungle?”

Clever, Anthony, but not clever enough. It amuses Harry, the boy’s curiosity, how he conceals it inside his proclivity for awful metaphor. Piling up his plate with mashed potatoes, roast beef, caramelized onion gravy, and broccoli salad, Harry smirks.

“Anthony, my dear fellow, trust that I say this with the best intentions. You’re a fine mind, but a connoisseur of fine metaphor…you are not. For all our sake, and more importantly, for Ravenclaw’s reputation, please stop.”

Half the table starts clapping—there is whistling, laughter free-falling, breadsticks being thrown that Harry ducks under while covering Padma. Anthony is not as swift and gets a faceful of baked retribution. Roger Davies acts as the voice of Ravenclaw’s collective consciousness.

“He’s got that right, Goldstein! Your metaphors are dropping our average wit.”

“Oh, sod off, you gits. You’re too pretentious to appreciate true wit.” Anthony wipes the powdery remnants off his face, scowling as he is smiling, curiosity well diverted.

Laughter tickles the nape of Harry’s neck, breath warm and fanning on exposed skin. Padma clings to his arm, one tawny cheek pressed against his shoulder, snickering. “Oh, Merlin. You did not just say that.”

“Laugh it up, Padma.” Nose upturned, chest puffed out, Anthony stares down at her with shining eyes, half-lidded teasing. “You’ll regret this when I’m rich and famous for my dashing looks and clever wit.”

Padma buries her face in Harry’s neck, laughter grown wild and spilling wet-husky over his skin. “Harry…please make him…stop.”

A huff of soft laughter, soft dipping of fingers low on her spine. “Your will is my command.” Harry helps her sit upright, then picks up his utensils. “I came upon an interesting conversation between Professor Quirrell and little Draco.” Sly, casual, exactly the type of thing that galvanizes Anthony into single-minded focus.

Anthony’s fork slips through his fingers and into his plate. “Must you call him that? It ruins my
appetite.” His eyes gleam even as he grimaces, blue bright with interest.

Smiling, Harry nods. What could be worse…? Ah. “Apologies, Anthony. Malfoy Jr. then.”

“Mate, that sounds even worse…” Anthony’s complexion goes sickly-green, and he pushes his plate away, appetite well and truly ruined. “My dad gave me the wands and cauldrons talk using that word.”

Again, Harry nods, satisfied, lips wickedly curved. “Now you know how we feel about your metaphors.”


“If I understood correctly, he wrote to his father complaining about Professor Quirrell’s first lesson, and his father wrote back telling him to confront the professor.” Wryness coats his voice, weaves into his smile, the kind Harry reserves for Draco. “You can guess how that went.”

Anthony’s expression is a study in contrasts, half-gleeful, half-depressed. “And I missed that?”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think Mr. Malfoy will enjoy the professor’s reply any more than his son did.”

“My dad would pay gold to see that.” As predicted, Anthony perks right up, mentally penning the letter to his father.

“I imagine it will be rather entertaining.” Thanking Padma for filling his glass, Harry hums, speculative, gaze trailing over to the Gryffindor table. Hermione Granger and Percival Weasley are holding court for the better part of lunch, much to the youngest Weasley’s disgruntlement, calling for signatures and revolution. Who would have thought Professor Quirrell’s lesson would instigate a campaign for educational rights, and more subtly, against blood purity? “In any case, it might actually happen if those Gryffindors succeed in their petition.”

Both follow his gaze as soon as his words register.

“Granger and Weasley?” Anthony snorts, shaking his head. “They’ve gone barking mad, true.”

Smirking, Padma reaches out an arm behind Harry’s back, flicking Anthony’s ear. “You’re one to talk. Didn’t you also write to your father?”

Retaliation is quick and light and wrings out one feminine yelp.

“Yes, but my dad works for the Department of Magical Education. I couldn’t not write to him about this.”

Harry chuckles at the simultaneous rubbing of red-tinged ears. “Has he replied yet?”

“Yes, this morning. I can tell you that Madam Marchbanks is not happy, not that she usually is, but now less than ever. Dad said she’s been trying to bring back some subjects for years, but her proposals tend to get...misplaced.”

The name comes to him in an instant, fresh-cut in memory from those records Anthony delivered just yesterday. One of his parents’ test examiners. Misplaced, hmm? Convenient. “You don’t say.”

 Seamlessly, it slips between Anthony’s words, but Padma tilts her head, one curious glance of dark
eyes. Harry smiles and mouths *later* to her. It won’t do to interrupt Anthony in the middle of such thought-provoking news.

“So she’s even more determined not to let it go this time, but frankly…my dad doesn’t have much hope. At best, they’ll bring the matter to discussion, then they’ll discuss some more, then they’ll say there’s no gold for these changes, and that will be the end of it.”

Anthony pauses for a long gulp of water, then continues as if he never stopped.

“Dad also wrote that, technically, they’re not allowed to interfere in Hogwarts, so even if they did decide to help, the money would be a donation for the school to use it as the Headmaster sees fit. He didn’t come out and say he won’t use the money for the reason it was given, but he heavily implied it when he wrote, and I quote, ‘broomsticks will be bought before Dumbledore fires Binns or hires a cursebreaker to solve the DADA mystery’.”

That quote…another pawn to the chessboard. Harry taps one finger against his chin, contemplates the political angle of such inaction. For now, it remains obscured. A sigh…back to the library it is. Perhaps this search will prove more fruitful.

“And the mystery deepens.”

“What mystery, oh—”

A breadstick is shoved into Anthony’s mouth.

“No. Please don’t.”
Hi, Harry

How’s your magic school? Have you made any friends yet? Are there really ghosts? Did you see the Hippogriffs Professor Flitwick mentioned? Can you send me some photos? And can you make them move like the ones we saw in the bookstore?

Sorry, I got a bit excited. Um, Hera is doing great, but I think she misses you. She’s been sleeping in your bed a lot. Can you maybe send her a recorded message and tell her you haven’t forgotten her? That’d be brilliant! Anyway, you were right about not buying an owl. Hera almost ate the one that brought your letter. Mum fainted again…it was so funny!

I’m doing great in school, except math. Now that you’re gone, my math average is dropping. I just don’t get Mr. Taylor’s explanations. Can you explain two-variable equations to me? Please? Nurse Appleby says my diet is working! She also said I should join a sport. What do you think? I like watching soccer, but I don’t know if I’ll be any good at it.

Oh, Mr. Smith told me to tell you that he can grade your homework like you asked, even if he doesn’t get why. He thinks your super private school isn’t worth its money if all you do is self-study. He also gave me a list of books for you, the science ones that you like. I had dad pay for them, and he says you can repay him when you get home. I just didn’t know how to send them. Wouldn’t they be too heavy for the owl?

Are you coming home for Christmas? I know it’s too early to ask, but dad said aunt Marge might be coming this year. I don’t think she will if you’re here. She can’t go anywhere without Ripper and Ripper won’t go anywhere near you so…please come? I don’t wanna spend Christmas getting my cheeks pinched every hour. And if you do come, dad said he’s gonna take us skiing since you’ll be there keeping an eye on me. You know how he is…I don’t think he even knows how to exercise. Nurse Appleby says he should also go on a diet.

Anyway, I hope you’re having fun! Just don’t study all the time. Write back soon!

Your cousin,

Dudley

P.S. Hera says ‘sssSSSSsss’. I’m gonna guess that means ‘I miss you, Harry’…or she was telling me to feed her.

Amused, still sucking on his fingers, Harry folds his cousin’s letter and slips it into his bag. The owl’s irascible nipping makes sense now. At least it’s early enough that not many students are in the Great Hall to witness the avian attack. He can already see the news headline: ‘Harry Potter, defeater of You-Know-Who, viciously assaulted by owl. Is it a case of illegal breeding by dark wizards? Beware the wrath of the Dark Bird!’ Because the magical world is above mundane things like defamation laws and journalistic objectivity.

Sighing, Harry butters his toast, keeping half his attention on the open doors for Padma’s or Anthony’s arrival. Instead, Hermione Granger walks in and comes right at him, cheeks flushed and eyes burning with purpose, dragging Neville Longbottom by the elbow.

“Hello. I’m Hermione Granger. We met on the train, if you remember?” Breathlessly, she smiles while Neville hovers beside her.
“Miss Granger.” Harry smiles up at her, taking in the warm-honeyed eyes, their raw determination. Ah. The petition it is then. “How could I forget such pretty eyes?”

Her smile falters even as heat reddens her skin from the tip of her nose to the line of her collarbone. “Do you… really mean that? Or are you just saying it to be polite?”

Clever girl… but not cunning. As if he needs to lie. Hermione Granger’s eyes are her most striking feature. “I’m always honest in my compliments, Miss Granger, but merely that.”

“Oh.” Teeth bite into her bottom lip, startlingly white against the cherry-red flesh. “Well, um, thank you.” And then, “Your eyes are pretty too.” So quick it breaks the sound barrier. A shockwave of incalement and mortified honesty.

Neville Longbottom appears twice as mortified, gaze glued to the floor as if hoping it will open up and swallow him down.

“Thank you.” Harry schools his expression to one of mild politeness out of habit. Taking mercy on them, no matter how entertaining it is for him, he motions to the empty space on the opposite bench. “Would you and your companion like to sit?”

“Oh, yes.” Two frantic nods, though only Hermione speaks. “This is Neville, the boy I mentioned before on the train.”

Neville undergoes an enormous transformation at that. Spine gone ramrod straight, posture hardened into granite. He holds his head high, eyes deep as the old greenwoods. “Neville Frank, heir to the House of Longbottom. Honored to meet you.”

As soon as his introduction is delivered, before Harry can even reply, the transformation comes undone. Neville folds into himself, twitching, sweating, sinking below the collar of his robes. Fascinating, in a blink-and-you-miss-it kind of way.

“Likewise.” He dips his head at the boy, then turns to the more outspoken of the duo, since Neville’s social conditioning doesn’t seem to extend beyond that greeting. “So what can I do for you, Miss Granger?”

“Hermione, please.” She glances at him sideways, meeting his gaze as much as she is avoiding it, maybe worried about overstepping boundaries.

“You may call me Harry then.” Smiling, he acquiesces easily, seeing no reason to alienate intelligent company. As for Neville… he’s manner… born in aristocracy, unlike Draco’s bourgeois breeding. That micro-glimpse under the piteous veneer intrigues him enough to offer the same. “You as well, Longbottom.”

Neville stares at him with eyes wide and full of amazement for many seconds. Coming out of his trance, the boy starts out strong, but shrivels into stuttering anxiety halfway through. “You can call me Neville. I’d actually like that, if we could become friends, I mean? Like… our parents? I have… have photos of our mums and… gran could send them? She talks about your granduncle a lot… But only if you want to. I mean, you don’t have to. It’s fine if you don’t—”

“Neville.” One command of his name, and the boy’s mouth snaps shut along with his respiratory system. “Breathe.” Harry gentles his voice once Neville sucks in a deep breath. “I’d love to get to know you.”

And he means it. Our families, hm? Political allies, close friends, or something in-between? Either way, Neville possesses a wealth of information.
“Oh. All right. Good…that’s…that’d be brilliant.” Slowly, a smile spreads across the boy’s face, shaky as it is beaming. “I’ll come by when I have those photos?” Hopeful, careful not to overreach.

“I’d appreciate that.” Harry returns it with one warmer, more encouraging. “And you can come by anytime, you know? We’re only two tables away. Gryffindor is a bit…loud for my tastes, but you’re welcome to our table.”

Newborn flame is lit in Neville’s eyes, green ablaze with resolution, like this is a kingly task he mustn’t fail to carry out. “Thanks. I’ll do that.”

Harry’s brow lifts, mirth bubbling in his chest. Neville is…an interesting character. He fits the profile of the shy, awkward kid who grows up to be the gallant superhero in Dudley’s comic books with disturbing accuracy. Only time will tell. Still, it is a very good thing the magical world is unaware of spandex.

Biting back laughter, Harry’s gaze falls on the quiet girl next to Neville. Unusual for her…to be so quiet. “The invitation extends to you as well, Hermione.”

“Thank you, Harry.” She is blushing, smiling sappily, blindingly. Infatuation full-fledged but without real depth, and there is something less superficial behind her smile. Neville isn’t the only one craving friends it seems.

When Harry says nothing more, keeps gazing at her, waiting patiently, she blinks once, and again, gathering her bearings. “Right.” Still flushed, embarrassed, but quickly moving past her lapse. “Well, we heard about your lesson with Professor Quirrell. Parvati, that is Padma’s twin, passed around her sister’s notes in the common room. The upper years were stunned, to say the least. Percy Weasley came up with the plan to petition the Board of Governors for the reinstatement of Magical Theory as a core subject. Neville and I are our year’s representatives to the other Houses. If Ravenclaw would sign our petition, we’d be grateful.”

Oddly convinced of his acceptance, confidence fully restored at the end, as if this is but a formality. Harry appraises her curiously. Should he open her eyes to the reality she faces if she goes through with the petition? He doesn’t care enough, but…if he lets her, if he stays quiet—they will break her.

Hermione Granger is just a girl. She doesn’t deserve to be broken for being too young and bright-eyed, to have her wings cut before she learns how to fly. Perhaps…he is projecting? Ah. Sentimentality. He exhales one long, deep sigh, and bores his eyes into hers.

“What do you hope to accomplish with this petition, Hermione?” Her brows wrinkle in confusion, but he doesn’t award her time to formulate her response. Harry needs her to understand, not debate the entrenched philosophy of wizardkind. “You’re a smart girl. You must know that the best you can hope for is raising awareness among the student population.”

Caught flat-footed, Hermione chews her lips, uncertain, not conceding his point but neither denying it. “What do you mean?”

“First year is your big entrance into the magical world. There are eyes and ears everywhere, analyzing your every move, evaluating your latent potential. A muggleborn activist is not a label you want to attach to yourself so early in the school year. Doors will close before you can even take one step past their threshold after you graduate. What is so important that you would jeopardize your whole future?”

She is staring at him, at a loss for words, aghast and growing affronted. Her lips tremble as they separate—
“He’s right, Hermione. I’m sorry…but he is.” Neville cringes beneath her gaze, and even though he apologizes, there isn’t an ounce of regret for the words themselves, only for having to say them.

“But…but you’re here, too, Neville. You signed the petition.” Sputtering, visibly hurt, betrayed.

Harry can tell she doesn’t understand. Not yet. Neville is coming out of his shell though, unwilling to throw his friend to the wolves, fighting to make her see reason. Hence, Harry passes the reins to the boy for now. It will be counterproductive to interfere, for both their sake.

“My family’s political stance allows me to become involved. Nobody will find it strange if the Longbottom heir advocates equality whether in education or blood status.”

Neville’s voice is soft tones and certitude, but Hermione’s rises high, higher with every word she speaks.

“So…so the problem with me is that I’m muggleborn? I can’t have an opinion because my parents are muggles?”

*That* signals the end of the line for Neville. He quails at her outburst, cowed under the volume of her voice and the searing wrath in it. Poor boy isn’t built for conflict, much less with the opposite gender. Before things become too heated, Harry assumes control of the conversation.

“You can, of course, have an opinion, and you can fight for your beliefs.” Narcotic, smooth as the tranquility of beast-tamers. Hermione focuses on him, eyes wild-gleaming, raptor-gold beneath the thickness of her lashes, and he smiles. “What we’re saying is that now is not the time to do that. Once you graduate would be optimal, when you have the credentials and the connections to support the changes you want to introduce, if you’re determined to go down that road.”

It still hasn’t sunk in. Harry can see it in the spasm of that muscle in her jaw, the pursing of those raw-bitten lips, that quality of never giving up if the cause is just. She won’t last long without moderating that bad habit.

“I’m not telling you this to discourage you—quite the opposite, in fact.” He pauses, and his voice shifts, lashing like a spring uncoiling and just as hard. “I simply don’t want to see you get hurt—and you will get hurt. You will be targeted and made an example of. If you won’t believe anything else, then trust me on this.”

A gasp that becomes a shudder, flinching, as if seeing him for the first time. She licks her lips once, twice, then swallows that shudder until she can meet his eyes again. “What *can* I do?”

“You can let Weasley take the lead and act as one of his many nameless supporters. He’s a pureblood and doesn’t hide his political aspirations. Everyone *expects* this from him. If he wants to gather support from the other Houses, he’s better off appointing Neville and his little brother as the spokespersons. No matter how unsuitable Ronald Weasley is to the task, he’s still a pureblood, and that’s all they’ll see or care about.” His gaze narrows at the implications of her involvement. Was it deliberate on Weasley’s part? Malice, or pure idiocy? “To be perfectly honest, Weasley shouldn’t have endangered you like this. Public exposure will only hurt you at this point.”

Neville nods, relief wrapping around the whole of his expression. “I agree with Harry.”

Quietly now, Hermione scrutinizes him. “You never said anything before, Neville.”

Panic flits across his face, sucking out the baby fat on his cheeks, and something else, more hollow. A wet core in the ring of his pupil, bleeding outward, green infected with the rust-red of decayed feeling. “You’re the only one who…who talks to me, Hermione. Everyone else just treats me like…
like a squib.” His voice fluctuates between highs and lows, like my family dying under his breath. “But not you. You sit with me in Potions and... and try to help me, even... even when I always mess up. I didn’t... want you to stop... to think I’m being an ungrateful prat.”

“Oh, Neville.” Hermione looks gutted. “You’re not a squib. I don’t know who’s been filling your head with nonsense, but you shouldn’t listen to them.”

An emotional upheaval clings to the particles in the air. Hermione’s political nescience is one thing, but Neville... Childhood trauma perhaps? The memory of the vulture-hatted grandmother on the train station and her terrible disappointment emerges in his mind.

Harry hums, butters another slice of toast, far removed and ruled by logic in this case. “The textbook definition of a squib is a person born to magical parents but lacking the ability to use magic. Some display proficiency in passive magical arts such as potions or creature breeding, and may even be able to perceive magic, but that is the extent of their abilities. By that definition, you are most definitely not a squib. I haven’t seen you perform magic since we share no classes, but your presence at Hogwarts proves your magical ability. Taking into account Professor Quirrell’s recent revelations, you’re just as much a wizard as the rest of your peers. Study hard, Neville, and you will succeed.”

Having said his piece, Harry bites into his toast. Hermione goggle at him, at his casual tone, his relaxed poise, but Neville quivers with that same careful hope of before.

“You really believe that, Harry?”

“It is an indisputable fact. You may lack an aptitude for potions, if Professor Snape’s disparaging comments are to be believed, but that doesn’t mean you fail at all other subjects.”

Ironically, their expressions switch places at his words. Hermione swells with hope while Neville gapes at him.

“But I... I fail at everything, that is.”

“No, you don’t. What you fail at, if I’m guessing correctly, is asserting your will on the magic.” Finishing his toast, Harry takes a sip of water, then pins the boy with his undivided attention. “You need to understand, Neville, that the most important component in spell-casting is the power of one’s will. Do you truly believe you will master the spells or are you inwardly convinced they will fail before you even cast them?”

“Well... I—I want them to work, I really do.” Stumbling over his words, perhaps even his thoughts, too disoriented to have grasped the true meaning of what he is being asked.

Patiently, Harry reiterates his question. “Yes, but do you believe they will?”

A shake of his head as meaning takes deep root. Bewildered, mumbling, trying to reconcile what he is being told with what he knows for years. “I hadn’t... thought about it this way before.”

“See, Neville?” Hermione grins, one dazzling flash of teeth, taking his hand in hers and squeezing tight. “Harry agrees with me. I told you it was all a matter of self-confidence. You just have to believe in yourself more.”

Abashed, Neville grins back, beet-red around the curves of his ears. “Thanks, Hermione. I’ll try harder from now on.”

And Harry sighs. Still missing the point then. “You don’t need to try harder, Neville. Just trust that the magic will respond to your will.” What might help? Ah. Maybe... “There are self-help books for
low self-esteem in the muggle world. Perhaps Hermione can ask her parents to buy you some?”

She’s nodding before Harry even completes his sentence, squeezing the boy’s hand more tightly when Neville oscillates between hope and shame. “Absolutely. I can do that.”

“You have nothing to lose by reading them but much to gain—and if you don’t want others to know, you can disguise the covers.”

Under the pressure of Harry’s logic and Hermione’s excitement, Neville finally caves. “All right. I guess…I can give them a try.”

Good thing he isn’t built for conflict.

Severus is savoring his second glass of sweet dessert elf wine when the entrance to the Great Hall parts wide open with no warning—Lucius Malfoy saunters inside, dressed to bedazzle, not a single lock of hair astray. His facial bones are high and cut sharply, his pupils rimmed with platinum, his lips thinly inflexible. The wine’s taste slowly changes as Severus swallows. Bitterness, an alchemic transmutation, strychnine under his tongue. Why on earth is Lucius here? Not even one month into the term and everything has gone seven ways to hell. What is to come next? The Dark Lord back from the great unknown and hiding in the Gryffindor girls’ dorm?

A hush descends over the dining crowd, the clacking of Lucius’ cane overpowering in the charged atmosphere, an attraction too exotic, too ostentatious to go unnoticed. That man…just like his bloody peacocks. Merlin forbid he isn’t the center of attention wherever he goes.

Albus puts down his cutlery, then dabs at his mouth with a napkin, something bemused and atypically displeased catching at the edges of his smile. “Good evening, Lucius. I’m afraid I did not receive word that you would be visiting.”

“Dumbledore.” Syllables fall from his lips, one by one. A cursed sequence of vowels and consonants. A deadly incantation. “You did not receive word because this is not an official visit. I am not here for school matters that concern you.”

And the way he intones that pronoun… Severus has heard less fervor in Lucius’ voice for the nastier spells in his repertoire.

“Truly?” Doubtful, mockingly blithe. Albus stares down at Lucius even when he is the one staring up. “What brings you to Hogwarts then?”

“I have private matters to discuss with one of your professors.”

“Oh?”

Severus really doesn’t like how that oh sounds, neither what follows.

“Severus perhaps?”

“No.” Abruptly, Lucius raps his cane against the floor. He closes his mouth, and when he opens it again, there is a bite, a slyness not present before. “I do not care to know where you were informed that Potions Master Severus Snape and I are more than cordially associated, if barely that, but it will behoove you not to make such assumptions in the future. You might give people…the wrong impression.”

What. Severus goes still and white as a sheet. What is it with Albus and people implying all sort of
dirty things so airily? And must the both of them drag *his* name into their sordid jousting?

Albus nods, unruffled, if not more mocking in the dismissive ease of the gesture. “Ah. We certainly would not want that to happen.”

“Well done.” Lucius’ patent sneer hard-lines the dips of his face. “If you will excuse me, I have an appointment to keep with Professor Quirrell.”

The hush is broken mere moments after he leaves, and Severus rounds on Albus with thunder in his eyes, white-hot sparks igniting his temper. “Have you gone mad, Albus? What were you trying to accomplish by throwing my past around like muggle confectionery? I’m not hiding the truth of what I’ve once been, but there is no reason for you to *advertise* it in the middle of the Great Hall of all things.”

Albus picks up his cutlery, as if nothing is out of the ordinary. “I cannot speak for Lucius’ motives, but that was not my intention, my boy.”

Serene, unapologetically pacific, no elaboration, no answers forthcoming.

“I find this hard to believe after that riveting performance.” With nothing more to say since Albus seems content to heave all culpability on Lucius’ shoulders, Severus prods at the alarming bells ringing in his thoughts. “What does *Lucius* want with Quirrell?”

“I would not know, but if I had to hazard a guess, it must relate to Quirinus’ lesson on magical theory.”

“You—not knowing something?” What a pile of *bullshit*. Severus grits his teeth, inflamed, patience worn-out and snapping like an elastic band, sharp and stinging against the flesh of his cheek. “You damn well know. I can only hope you also know what you’re doing, Albus.” Leaning closer, away from prying ears, he works his last warning out of his clenched jaw. “For the record, I do not like this. *I do not like this at all.*” He stands then.

“Where are you going, Severus?” Finally, a reaction, a beat of unease.

“Where else?” His mouth bends out of shape, more taunting than smirking. “To play my part in this farce you claim to have no knowledge of.”

Something fishy is going on here, and he’ll be damned if he’s caught with his pants down when all the chess pieces have been moved into position. Albus’ parting line, the pull of its gravity, more than confirms it.

“Please take care, my boy.”

Candlelight pours under the door of Quirrell’s office, flickering back and forth, chasing the shadows pooling in grooves of stone and shallow crevices. Severus presses his back against the wall, silent, invisible, the sound amplifying spell rushing out of the tip of his wand. Lucius’ voice comes first, barely recognizable, stressed in tones that—

“—beg your forgiveness. Had I known, I would have—”

“Silence.” Sibilant, calm…and anything *but* calm. Fatal juxtaposition.

*Oh Merlin.* No, *nonono.* Not him. *How can he be here?* That cadence is an evidence of *his* presence, disembodied chill of sound, coiling around Severus’ ankles and glaciating as it creeps up his body.
“Lies, excuses, evasions. I hear nothing but deception. You dare plead for mercy after ten years of sweet betrayal? Come to me dressed in all your finery and well-paid exculpation and yet claim ignorance? Do you take me for a fool, Lucius?”

The words slip through distorted and carrying the slick venom of a hiss. Severus tastes the toxicity in the sound, the quintessence of rage, and shrinks into himself.

“Never that, my Lord. I—”

Lucius’ sentence is cut in half of its own accord. Eerie, foreboding. Severus lowers his eyes in submission old-ingrained in him, but he isn’t even in his line of vision, much less his attention. Perhaps he imagines the frost, the poison—but the shivers still grip him, still crawl across his skin. Perhaps he isn’t its target, despite instinct screaming that he is. Then the door opens with an ominous click.

“Ah, Severus. Good, you have come. I was beginning to wonder if you had lost your way.”

He knows...he can...see me. All his artfully applied spells fail, leaving him frozen and exposed. Severus finds himself staring up at him, mapping out the contours of his face. Quirrell’s face, and yet not. He is all fangs and reptile litheness, naturally inhuman, snakeskin shed over and over until he gains the semblance of mankind—then he walks away. His voice spills over the curve of his shoulder, cold-blooded aggression, writhing with the promise of torture.

“Please, do come inside.”

Severus can only nod once, force the only words he wants to hear out of his throat.

“Yes, my Lord.”
Reflections in Souls

The diary is small, thin, old-bound black leather, the initials bold and gold-flaked, spiraling in the distinctive, refined flourish of his handwriting. Voldemort drags the pads of his fingers across the smooth front cover, tendrils of magic seeping in the white vortex of its pages, reaching for something similar, familiar...hungry. A fragment of a mirror that can never reflect what is. Slowly, curiously, it stirs and splits into its own tendrils, its own awareness, reaching back with all that was, latching onto the source of magic. A feeding frenzy, insatiate, devouring what is freely given, seeking more, seeking deeper for the dark-pure taste of soul.

Voldemort severs the connection before the fragment can touch his core, placing the diary on his desk with less care than he should. Seeking to devour him, is it? Ambitious, clever boy, still intact, still broken. What begins as insurance, being more cautious with the scattered pieces of his soul, more assured of their safety, now opens new possibilities. If the diary can siphon his magic, his life, his soul...if it can become corporeal...if if...

Secrets of the Darkest Art is as vague about the subtleties of the Horcrux as it is about its creation. There is a footnote about remorse and reclaiming the soul-shard but nothing more in that vein. In truth, it has been more of a trial and error kind of process so far. The follies of sweet sixteen…Voldemort sighs, rubbing the dips in his temples. Remorse? For what? The action itself, the particulars of the action, the consequences? He regrets not having the prudence to research in greater lengths before he split his fucking soul now. Maybe he can even regret Lily Potter’s death if it will help, but he remembers...he cast the Killing Curse, yes, and she fell...but not to his wand. Will it matter if he regrets?

Myrtle’s death, on the other hand, is too...insignificant, diluted with feelings of pain-pleasure and rip-rip-ripping. Regardless if he can or cannot...does he need to regret? If the diary is capable of absorbing him—or at least attempting to—can’t he reabsorb it in much the same manner? And why shouldn’t he? Seven may be the perfect magical number but three is not far behind. The ring and the locket should be enough to sustain his immortality. Harry Potter...that boy...polite, cunning, brilliant, charming...another Tom Riddle, another soul-shard inside him. Living. Fragile. Out of his control, out of his hands. An unintentional mistake—he will unmake that mistake, will take back what is his. One way, or the other.

Voldemort stares at the black soul anchor carelessly thrown on his desk. It has grown quiet, fallaciously unassuming...plotting. At war with his own soul. Perhaps, yes...that fucking prophecy. Power to vanquish him. If it is his soul, if it is himself... Possible, but not yet. He has time. Voldemort has years to plan before that boy becomes the threat of his potential. No need to rush into things, to be reckless, impulsive...that thrice-cursed Samhain night. Never again. Quirrell’s body won’t survive experimentation with soul magic, and he has eyes on the boy even when this body fails, when he is forced to leave. Severus is watching him, will keep watching closely. What is there to be wary of?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He laughs, opens his lungs and pulls out satisfaction, thick and dark like blood on hands, and the leather shivers.

Amused, Voldemort strokes its slim spine with one fingertip. “You are safe for now. You and Harry Potter both.”

The Philosopher’s Stone takes precedence now that his course is set.
The first Sunday of October is a nimbus of autumn colors and smells, a fragrance of petrichor in the morning moisture and the crisp, clean air. Flames swirl in the hearth, licks of heat and light, soft, crackling sounds. Sitting near the window, Harry basks in the warmth and that perfect view on the grounds, breathing in the aromas wafting up from the steaming cup of tea in his hands. Professor McGonagall sips at her own cup in between enumerating the amusing tales of his father’s attempts to gain entry into the Gryffindor girls’ dorm.

Attempt number thirteen promises to be hilarious, involving an overcomplicated levitation charm, the unconventional use of ski poles, and the theft of one of the kitchen pans to be strapped on as protective gear over his lower regions. Doomed in the end…by the wrath of a house-elf.

“—never seen a house-elf so angry before. After Binky was done tearing a strip off his hide, the whole House was wide awake and laughing themselves to tears, even the majority of the girls. It didn’t save him from the mandatory detention, of course. The nerve of that boy…three in the morning and trying to sneak into girls’ bedrooms. At least he never stole from the kitchens again after Binky’s rather detailed description of sheep testicles’ stew.”

Harry coughs out a laugh at the thought of a tiny house-elf glowering at his father and threatening to scoop out his testicles with a spoon for the evening stew. What an inglorious end to the Potter line. Shaking his head, he refills his cup, then leans back against the cushions, debating how to phrase the question roiling in his mind ever since his first Transfiguration class. Professor McGonagall gazes at him with clear eyes, cataloguing every twitch of his body, every microscopic change in his expression, waiting, knowing. Just as well. Not like he’s tried to hide it anyway.

“What year will we be instructed in the Animagus transformation, Professor?”

Her gaze is a rueful, soft green that ricochets off the surface of his stare, slipping back through hers softer, palliated, a shade of fondness. Harry has seen this enough times to infer what triggers it—when he exhibits some kind of similarity to his father.

“Third year will be the initiating stage. The Animagus transformation is the pinnacle of Transfiguration. Complex, intrinsic magic. It requires not only skill in the subject but the willingness to face yourself as you are. Not many have the mental fortitude to acknowledge all their flaws and imperfections, much less accept them for what they are.”

A current of raw electricity courses through his nervous system. Can that mean what he thinks it does? Hyperaware, Harry lurches forward in his seat, heart rate picking up speed, pounding beneath his ribcage. How her smile sharpens, all teeth and teasing and secret meaning—it does. She knows…she knows and she’s dangling soul magic in front of his face like…like a cat with a fresh kill between her jaws. Ah. A game, the same game he plays with Professor Flitwick. Only…it isn’t just a game. It…he’s so used to being alone that he doesn’t know what to call it. How many people know? How many care?

Harry laughs, tips his head at her. You win this round, Professor. It is easy to guess the prize she wants, and frankly, he’s been on the cusp of giving in for two weeks now. One of those incongruous things, simple, complicated. Trust. It is easier with her…she's already given him her heart.

“You are not going to tell me how it is done, only tease me with the knowledge of its intricacies. Your form suits you, Professor.”

“And you are not the first to say that, Harry.” She smirks, and it is saucy, red-tilted on her lips, cutting her age in half. It lasts no longer than a fragment of a second, uncurling, chasing the game as it turns into something open and generously given. “You’re an excellent student with great affinity for Transfiguration, and if you had asked me about any other piece of magic, I would tell you.”
Truth, and trust, and green clashing, splintering, fusing. Harry listens to the rasp of her voice and the hitch in her breath and the soulful matter in the space between them.

“"The Animagus transformation…it is not just skin and bones, not just the animal hide on your back. It goes deep, the deepest you can go… Sometimes, people may never come back… they don’t want to, and forcing them back always leaves something behind.”

Things left behind, purified in the fire, bled out, bled in…he knows. “It isn’t…just Transfiguration, is it?”

A dilation of pupils, a pulse of wild magic. She stares into his eyes, and he knows there are no words for this… instinct, blood-beat, a pure edge of being. “It is so much more than that… you can’t… be until it swallows you up and spits you out, like a babe cut from the womb, until it flays the skin off your bones and rips the senses off your nerves and you… you can see without eyes.”

He knows better than anyone. A transcendence slipping over flesh. Soul and body burning, melting, meshing hotly. And he wants this, this… give-take-become. Harry licks his lips, pursuing the shift of her eyes, the rhombus of those cat-pupils, want writhing on his tongue, in his veins, under his skin. “When should I ask?”

Just when, just trust. Because she will teach him, wants to teach him.

Her fingers tighten around her cup as time slows. The professor weighs him up and down with her gaze, up, down, up—

“If you are still interested… the end of the school year.”

_The end—_? _Summer?_ Harry hasn’t made any plans for the summer, other than half-thinking of searching the Alley for knowledge on soul magic—knowledge she offers without strings attached. Incentive, true… but the intention behind it is guileless, born from that fondness, an urge to feed the fledgling bond. A real, tangible connection. _Equal_. He’s never had one of those, doesn’t know what it means, but… he follows the thrum of blood from the base of her throat to her heart—he can hear it there, palpitating, an anxious, frantic stutter. He knows what he’ll find if he slides his palm against her chest and digs his fingers in, digs out truth and red, warm organs. Isn’t that how it starts?

“Thank you, Professor.” Harry grins, a wide slice of mischief and eagerness. “We’ll be seeing each other this summer.”

Her fingers slacken, arteries relaxing, smooth lines in her wrists. She is still tight, but in that natural way of hers, and she’s smiling, more challenge than smile. “Bear in mind that it can take up to three years to master your form once you begin training.”

His grin eats it all up, widening. “I can be very patient for the things I want, and I have nothing but time, though I doubt it will take me that long. Shall we bet?”

“No bet will be made. I’m not enabling bad habits.” She huffs, disapproval in the pursing of her lips, but Harry can tell she’s amused. “At least you’re sensible enough to ask for my help. Your father didn’t even tell me he wanted to achieve the transformation until years after he had done it. He even had the gall to call it my graduation gift.”

“Oh?” _Interesting_. _An unregistered Animagus, hm?_ No such record exists in the Animagus registry. Hogwarts’ library holds a copy that spans centuries, though the list begins to gradually thin around the mid-eighteen hundreds. It fills up after the ministry issues a fine against unregistered Animagi during Grindelwald’s rise, but not to the prior degree.
Something…doesn’t add up. An Azkaban sentence for the ‘crime’ of not registering? Why such heavy-handed regulation? An animal form is a versatile ability, especially during civil war, but what does an additional sentence matter to those convicted of treason? They’re going to Azkaban either way, and on a more permanent basis. Why not a simple monetary fine for those innocent of war crimes? Unless…unless it has more to do with the nature of the magic than the risk of unregistered Animagi. Politics again? One more page to the ever-growing dossier of political manure he’s compiled so far.

Cocking his head, Harry hums. “What animal was he?”

“A stag.” Pride warms her voice, merges with the bright orange light spilling from the fireplace, then she clicks her tongue as the fire crackles. “I wanted to mount his great ruddy head on my wall when he showed me.”

“He must have been…quite the specimen.”

“Indeed. Prime hunting material.”

Harry leaves Professor McGonagall’s office twenty minutes before the appointment with Professor Flitwick for his monthly evaluation. What is coincidence and what is premeditated? They want me to trust them… he thinks back on the professors’ words, how they twist now into then and fill the gaping holes, pour deathless love in his bones and whisper what it is to be made from blood and sacrifice. How much of him do they see? How much is shadow and specters and echoes of feeling?

Professor McGonagall wants to know him and wants him to know James Potter. Lily Evans lives in the magic Professor Flitwick wants to show him…she lives inside them. Harry stops outside the Ravenclaw Head’s office and asks himself where does he want to go. Will he go back or will he go on? He’s not ready to go…too soon, too sudden, but…there is no past or future in limbo, and he can’t keep only one foot in the present. This world he walks…politics, oil on skin, silk on eyes, lies on teeth. Where is the magic that was promised, the wildness, the arcane origins, the primordial fire? He’s only seen them behind locked doors. What lies behind this door?

Something is pressing on his optical nerves, makes his eyes sting and blur out of focus, his brain heavy and scraping against the bones of his cranium. Harry puts one hand against the wall to steady himself—

Fuck them…there is no…light and dark…magic… Smoky, viscid substance, a soft caress, a shape in the place of darkness between earth and death. Harry splays his fingers and leans his weight on his arm, rubs his eyes with the back of his other hand, sweat slicking the gap between his brows, above his lip, breathing hard and that voice—breaks him open, glides through the cracks, makes a home in the pith of his nerves. What…what does it want from him? Listen…live…my heart…my soul… Feels like love, like nuclear fusion, like power on an atom, like a million little black suns beneath his eyelids.

He can’t breathe. He can’t think. He can’t. Pressure, tight constriction around his mind and under his ribs, being laid down and dissolved in white heat, tightening, burning. A circle of fire. Blood-red. And he doesn’t understand, doesn’t care to understand, still reaches out with too-small fingers, aching and desperate and out of his mind as he is held between fire and blood. Suspended in hot air that quickly thickens with the stirrings of blazing memory—because they are right there and why can’t he reach them why can he never why why why—

One lungful of cold air, breath icing his chest, rushing to his brain, and it is vanished. Harry pushes himself off the wall, stretches his neck far back, fingers running through the damp mess matted
against his scalp, too heavy, too much soul in his body. Somewhere deep inside, he knows…the fire of his mother’s love, the copper red eyes, burnished as that voice, branding as the name to which this world submits. What is sinking in his skin, soaking through muscle and tissue, liquefying itself, melding with blood and cells.

Professor Flitwick must know, too. I told you because you asked. Isn’t that what he said? Is that all it is? Trust, is it? Harry sighs, then points his wand at his face, brushes the tip over his clothes, executing the spell chain of grooming charms Padma taught him. Once his appearance is fixed up, he raps his knuckles against the door twice, and when it opens, he greets the professor’s smile with his own.

“Right on time, Mr. Potter. Have a seat.” Professor Flitwick flits around, a blur of kinetic energy, exuberant, light as a feather, bringing out tea and biscuits…and books. Musty, valuable tomes, well-read and magically preserved through the passage of time. At the top of the pile rests one plain brown journal, engraved with softly cursive bronze lettering. Lily Evans—his mother’s grimoire.

“Thank you, Professor.” His smile grows, becomes more genuine, less tired. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Professor Flitwick pauses in the middle of serving the tea, tilting his head up to stare at Harry. “You are not referring to your monthly evaluation, I assume.” Humming, he passes over one full cup. “Because nothing is exciting there. You’re progressing splendidly, and you don’t need me to tell you that.” Laughter in his humming. “Not that I won’t, of course. Brilliant mind, Mr. Potter, and excellent questions during class.” He takes one small sip, smiles above his cup. “So, tell me, what would you like to talk about outside of class?”

What wouldn’t I? The thought comes unbidden, more true for the spontaneity of it. Harry chuckles. “Politics and magic.” Better to start with the impersonal matters. “I would like your insight on their connection, Professor. If you don’t mind?”

“Oh, I see.” The professor laughs even as he eyes him shrewdly. “Quirinus’ first lesson was…enlightening, no?” Another word silhouettes the meaning of enlightening. Perhaps…disturbing. “I’m impressed you gleaned as much from it. Well done, Mr. Potter.” Sharp eyes, a curve of praise on his mouth, a coiling vine of pleasure at such perception. “What is your opinion then? What is magic when entwined with politics?”

That voice churns across his tongue, in the hollows of his throat, abrades the soft parts of his cheeks, against the back of his teeth. When he parts his lips, it leaps out of his mouth, takes his flesh and blood with it. “There is no light and dark magic.”

“That is correct, Mr. Potter.” Sharper eyes, black as the vicious thrill in his smile. Professor Flitwick grasps the hint Harry lets slip, a narrow glimpse, a ripple close to the surface. “How did you come by this truth?”

Harry’s lips peel back, more a baring of teeth than a smile, layered with intent. It isn’t polite, and it isn’t civilized, a beast to another beast. “Can I be honest with you, Professor?” Can I trust you? The words are smooth like scales of ivory yet rough with promise, spawn an insult from nothing, the sound of clenching jaws in them.

The slash of ferocity on his mouth speaks for itself, molds the words that come forth. “Always, Mr. Potter.” A goblin’s smile, all blood on teeth, primal nature gorging itself on man.

Trust sealed by that bond. A breath, then, “I already knew.” Just like you do.
Professor Flitwick stitches the unspoken thread seamlessly. “Just like you knew how to perform the charms in my class on the first attempt, yes.”

Neither nods. It is redundant, they both know.

“You shared your suspicions about what happened that night.”

“And you want to know what I think is happening now.” He sighs, and the intimation falls heavy on Harry’s shoulders, slithers along the line of his spine, winding and snaking around each notch, from the nape of his neck to the small of his back. “I didn’t think the time for this discussion would come so soon. If you were any other person, I would demand blood for silence.” Again, he sighs, maybe in defeat, maybe in affection, or even a mixture of both. “I will trust you, Mr. Potter, as you have trusted me.”

And as the past unfolds and magic sears its mark on soul, Harry knows his what. Lily Potter and Tom Riddle are as bound to him as Harry is to them and they want him to feel the love, the fire, the blood, the sacrifice. They want him to live for himself. Even if it is a cruel kind of life fed on souls burning out.

Thirty minutes later, there are two cups of cold tea on the table, two blank faces, and silence waiting to be broken.

“You’re not concerned.” Low, curiously accented, Harry’s voice dominates the room, and the professor laughs.

“Why should I be?” Professor Flitwick stares at him, lips half-slanted in a cross between a smirk and a grin. “You’re who you want to be, and nobody can tell you otherwise.”

A thin brow arches loftily. “Will someone be telling me otherwise?”

“Bah. Albus is a nosy old coot, but he won’t approach you this year, I think.” He exhales one acid-licked sigh, the corners of his mouth lifting slowly. “If he ever will.”

Harry observes that almost-smile. The professor is amused…but it’s a cynical, embittered expression of amusement, and underneath that, old-living contempt suppurates in his veins. “Professor McGonagall mentioned he was the one to place me with my relatives. Why is the Headmaster so determined to meddle in things that don’t concern him?”

A shrug, careless as it is weary. “You should ask him that yourself, if he ever approaches you. I can only speak for myself.”

True, Harry supposes, if unfulfilling. “I think I will do that.” His gaze searches the professor’s for any sign of misgivings, and when he finds none, Harry smiles. “Thank you for your honesty, Professor Flitwick.”

“Think nothing of it. You only need to ask, and I will always answer.”

What he says, he means. He tears truth from his tongue, gives it bladed shape, stabs him with it, brutally. Harry tastes veracity on his tongue, rolls it up, rolls it down, swallows it whole until there is only acceptance and the aftertaste of respect.

Professor Flitwick vanishes the contents of their cups, refills them with hot Earl Grey, then sips leisurely, watching him out of the corner of his eye. “You are still concerned.”

Gingerly, Harry picks up his cup, gazing down at his reflection. Says nothing. Denies nothing…
because what can he—

He knows his what now…but at what price? Who dares spin the loom of Clotho and weave what is to be? Who dares brandish the rod of Lachesis and measure what is? Who dares wield the shears of Atropos and cut what was? On whose lips hangs the authority to destroy souls? What…where will those souls go once broken? Where will he—

“Come this summer,” the professor’s voice draws him like the firefly to the wet summer meadows, “I will be visiting my grandsire in Egypt, as I do every July. He’s seen far more cases of soul magic than I have. Would you like to come with me and talk to him, Mr. Potter?”

Harry tries to speak, but his tongue is dried, stuck to the roof of his mouth. He sweeps it across his lip, tries again. “Wouldn’t I be imposing on your family visit?”

“Your mother was my apprentice.” How it whorls around his vocal cords, that word…something infinite, immortal…even if she dies a thousand deaths, she can never die a true death. “When she finished her apprenticeship, I was planning on adopting her into the clan. Sadly, this never came to be, but I would adopt you if you wished.” He is dead serious. “Take your time and think about this until then. It is not an offer I make lightly, nor one you should accept without knowing what it entails.”

Harry doesn’t take his eyes off of him for the millionth of a second. This offer…is it for the echoes? For remorse? For him? “I’m not my mother. Why would you offer me that?”

A shadow rises as the sun goes down, a grief so bitter, so sweet it smells of sulfur. Professor Flitwick smiles at him. “No, you’re not, but you are all I have left of her.”

We both are... His stare moves from the professor’s face to his mother’s grimoire and back again. Harry inhales deeply, firms his jaw and nods once. “Won’t your clan object, though? I admit I didn’t leave the best impression last time I visited Gringotts.”

Professor Flitwick’s demeanor changes lightning-fast. He cracks a toothy grin, laughing so hard he bends in half, one palm smacking his knee. “Oh, I know! The whole goblin nation knows by now. Threatened to take your gold and let it slip to the press that the Boy-Who-Lived was dissatisfied with Gringotts’ fees on vault retention unless they waived them, did you? My grandsire was impressed. Not many wizards have the guts to do that.”

One more thing to be famous about, if not infamous. At least he’s earned it this time. Harry snorts, laughs with him. “So the goblins are not upset?”

“Merlin, no.” Still laughing, petering out with one last coughing grunt. He shakes his head, wiping off tears of mirth. “You gave us all a good laugh, though.”

Harry’s laughter, too, diminishes. He favors the offer with the gravity it deserves. Dead serious, as the master spoke of his apprentice. “I will think about it then.”

“Good.” Pleased, Professor Flitwick dips his chin. “Shall we return to our original discussion now?”
Harry Potter is as bright and green-eyed and fine-boned as Lily had always been, but Filius can see the veins of weariness beneath his skin. The fragrance of bergamot oil wafts in his nose, clings to his palate, when he sips at his cup. It smells of autumn and apprentice and things red as fire. Lids closed, Filius inhales the scent deep into his lungs as his mind travels back in time—an array of messy, color-coded notes and hot tea on the table, the spark of curiosity in her eyes, the living flame of her hair, laughter and unripe bliss. His lids open as he comes back to the present, the vision sealed in the treasure box of happier times, but the smell lingers, seeps in his tongue, and he can almost taste the flavor of those days.

“There is no light and dark magic, as you say. In the beginning, that was true.” Filius sighs, weary as the boy imbibing the wisdom in his words, a cracked, rasping breath, a vibration through legion dark ages. “The first magicals were simple men and women. They were struggling to survive in the wilderness—they needed food, warmth, shelter, tools, weapons. Magic in those days was a means to survival, something primal, instinctual. They had neither foci nor runes to channel magic, only the strength of their will. As they evolved, as their needs became more complicated, magic gained structure, became something else, a means to an end.”

Harry slants his head, shifts in his seat, leaning forward, intrigue filling his eyes, a keen, lustrous green that bleeds as much as it heals. Lily’s eyes…Lily’s curiosity, her stolen fire… Filius takes a swig of scalding tea. It smells like an eidolon, tastes like ichor spilling from Prometheus’ liver, and perhaps…it is absolution.

“Envy crafted spells to infect the mind. Lust concocted potions to ensnare the heart. Wrath birthed curses to hurt the body. Greed created rituals to mar the soul. What is today known as the Dark Arts originated from human sin.”

If there is anyone who knows sinners, who knows the pitiless blindness of self-love, the pitiful weakness in the pursuance of self-interest, it is Lily’s son. How the curve of Harry’s mouth turns downward, that furious tremble rippling over his skin, that jaded silence—they are all the validation Filius needs. A tapestry of damned souls immolated at the shrine of metempsychosis. Filius stares at what magic spawned from the womb of sin and fear and love, and Harry stares back with the wonder of the new-born, the sagacity of the old-lived.

“Magic is magic. An energy, inherently neutral, molded by human will and given purpose. It is metamorphic. It is what you make it to be. Humans corrupt all they touch, Mr. Potter.” Softly spoken, an inviolable truth, a single thing of purity in a world full of vices and power at the tips of sooty fingers.

Harry leans back, grown quiet, mulling, as Filius refills his cup and waits.

“What you’re saying is…” He speaks slowly, understanding and resenting that he does, voice slipping over the edged point of realization. “There are light and dark spells, magic corrupted by human nature and twisted into selfish purposes. It shouldn’t be that way, wasn’t meant to be that way…magic is magic...light and dark are just concepts humans forced on it to justify their deeds.”

“Exactly.” A smile plays on Filius’ lips, makes his next words lighter than they should be, all the more pressing in their expectations. “If you understand that, then you can answer my question. What is magic when entwined with politics?”

“A means to control.” Less statement, more resentment, it is fanged, too biting, too much like him.
“The Headmaster has turned down the Minister position three times because he doesn’t need the clout, does he?”

Shrewdly, he seeks Filius’ gaze, and when he gives the barest nod, Harry fleshes out his thoughts even as he bites into them.

“He is a gifted demagogue, with subtle skill in manipulating the masses under the aegis of light magic. His allies in the Wizengamot can enforce his political agenda under his watchful eye, and his time is better spent shaping the next generation in his own image.” A grimace, quick to appear, quicker to fade in something close to amusement, verisimilar. “Voldemort chose to launch a hostile takeover instead of a political campaign for the same reasons. He preyed upon pureblood doctrine to gather support and established himself under the banner of dark magic. Even though he was aware of the truth, he used the status quo to his advantage.”

Filius’ grin reaches far and wide, bisecting his cheeks, from one ear to another. “Twenty points to Ravenclaw for an excellent analysis.”

Harry laughs, then rolls his shoulders, joints popping, a heavy, slothful motion. He cocks his head to the side, muscles bulging in his neck, tension coiling tight, precipitant. There’s a touch of wildness in his profile, a jaguar’s anticipation as he waits for prey, lazily stalking, ready to pounce. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, Professor, but I have to ask. Will I learn anything if I stay for the next six years, or will I be wasting my time? Because Egypt becomes more and more appealing by the second…the magic…the history. You know…the world is out there…waiting.”

Filius knows then. He has always known this would happen soon, but like everything else when it comes to this boy, it happens too soon. Humans aren’t made to be caged, to be denied earth and sky, sun and moon, water and fire. No animal is, and in the rawest matter of their being, humans are animals. Hunting, howling, clawing, until they find meaning in their creation, until they can be nothing but what they are. Red blood and soul. Perhaps that is the price for free will and choice. Wanderlust, blood pulsing, soul searching.

“In terms of magic as is currently taught at Hogwarts?” Mirthless, Filius chuckles, a grudge, a thorn between his ribs, embedded deep, stuck there for ten long years. “No, I don’t believe you will. Self-study will yield the same results as lessons in class, perhaps even better in your case.” Still chuckling, less bitter now, he eyes him sharply. Calculative gleam and undertones of approval. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed what you’re struggling with. Tempering magic is not an easy thing, is it?”

Harry’s mouth splits in a slow grin that more than implies he knows he’s being watched, and that he chooses who sees what. “No, most certainly not.” There’s laughter in his voice, and fatigue, the kind that says he likes it not being easy.

Nodding, Filius smiles. Magic is worth the struggle. So many wizards and witches take magic for granted just because it is always there. They only scratch the surface, rarely care to dig beyond common usage, beyond what is already invented, not even to learn the hows and whys of past inventions. What fools…the whole lot of them.

Filius shakes his head, smile back on his lips, gazing up at Harry, then down at the books on the table. “These are for you, Mr. Potter, as you might have guessed. The bottom two are the textbooks for Magical Theory when the subject was taught as it should be. The middle one is a copy of a journal I acquired years ago that dates back to Hogwarts’ founding years. The rest are the textbooks I assigned before Albus censored my lessons. And you don’t need me to tell you what the journal at the top is.”

Silent, Harry moves from his seat, takes two steps and bends over the pile, fingers outstretched,
ghosting over the smooth brown cover of Lily’s journal. One brush of fingertips, slow and dragging, as if he can feel the texture of his mother’s skin, the memory of her fingers on soft leather. His head bows when he picks it up, maybe in gratitude for this gift, maybe to keep that feeling for himself. “Thank you.”

It would be ignoble to say you are welcome—because heirlooms belong to kin, because it wasn’t his to give, only his to return—and so Filius says nothing. The glance Harry darts at him as he slips the books in his school bag is warm with appreciation.

Once all of them are carefully packed, Filius clears the table and ends the meeting. “We can discuss in more depth what you wish to do after you finish your first year, and what my offer entails, during our next session.”

Smiling, Harry nods, lifting his school bag, one shoulder dipping under the heft of the added content. A press of his hand against black fabric, magic concentrated with obvious intent, leaves behind only the weight of its fibers. “I look forward to it, Professor.”

Wandlessly, wordlessly, with such unnatural ease that it becomes natural. No matter how many times Filius witnesses Harry perform magic, it still exhilarates him. Giddy, breathless, wanting to teach. If only he could teach all children as the Founders taught in their time.

Harry is almost at the door when the last piece on today’s agenda comes to Filius’ mind. “Oh. Did Minerva inform you about Samhain night?”

“Yes, she did.” One palm curled around the doorknob, Harry halts and tilts his head, the shadow of a smile in the angle of his cheekbone. “I shall be joining you this year.”

Overjoyed, Filius smiles even if Harry cannot see it. “I will see you then, Mr. Potter.”

“Until then, Professor.”

Samhain, All Souls Night. Feast of the dead, feast of apples. The night falls until the seeds of the harvest sink deep in the dark earth and the God of the Sun dies and walks the paths of the underworld. At the edges of the Forbidden Forest is where the professors take Harry in the quiet hours, away from Hogwarts’ rowdy celebrations. They lay down plaid quilts and pull out berries and nuts, meats and greens, bread and mead from the basket the house-elves prepared. They build a great fire and smear hot ash contoured with the rune of the Sun on their face.

Harry laughs and asks a million questions as they sit and feast by the fire, asks about the harvest, the rune, the rites, his parents. Remembering the dead…is it supposed to be like this? Laughter and full bellies and tales of carefree youth. He knows where their graves are in Godric’s Hollow but has never gone to visit. What is there to say? What is there to learn? Perhaps he’ll go this Yule…a son born in fire come to cold charcoal, come to return the life given as the Great Mother gives birth to the new Sun King on the long night.

He chews on a strip of beef jerky, his mother’s favorite food, and watches the writhing of wild flame. Professor Flitwick places something soft in the palm of his hand, and Professor McGonagall something hard in his other. Harry brings his hands close to his face, sees tufts of vermillion, flakes of sienna in their centers.

“You burn one lock of hair every year. Just how much did you pluck off the poor girl’s head, Filius?” Professor McGonagall’s voice echoes mid smoke and whisper-soft crackle, a huff of a laugh, teasing, light-hearted.
“There’s a little spell called the duplication charm, Minerva.” Dryly, Professor Flitwick snorts, gaze laughter-filled as it focuses on her offering. “And you’re one to talk. Just how much did you shed off the poor boy’s antlers?”

“I’ll have you know he shed it all on his own.” Even though she replies to her fellow professor, her gaze speaks to Harry, a chatoyant cat’s eye, animal glint and something feline in the way her body lounges over the quilt, like the playful sway of a tabby’s tail. “James used to rub his antlers against the trees every year after the rutting season was over. Something to do with a drop in testosterone. I saved this sample for Harry’s first Samhain since it was the one shed after his conception.”

Harry chokes on his jerky. Coughing, he reaches for the tankard of mead beside his thigh, but his hands are full, still holding onto the offerings. Professor Flitwick takes pity on him and tips the rim to his mouth. Harry swallows greedily, then mock-glares at Professor McGonagall. “You really needn’t have gone to the trouble, Professor.” But he’s laughing in the same breath and Professor McGonagall is smirking and Professor Flitwick chortles at their antics. “And I really didn’t need to know that.”

Her smirk grows to an impish grin. “Oh, but it’s customary to share stories around the fire.” Casually spoken yet nothing casual in her tone.

Harry smiles wryly. Just as he resigns himself to a string of embarrassing stories—at his expense more likely—Professor Flitwick raises one brow and smirks. The stare he directs at her is sharp with amusement.

“Should we share the story of that sixth year Valentine’s prank then, Minerva?”

She goes rigid under that smirk and stare. “Filius…don’t you dare…”

“Oh?” Laughter tickles Harry’s throat. He hums, mimics the casual-yet-not quality of her earlier tone. “I think I would like to hear that.”

“It was a brilliant combination of charms and warding, actually.”

Professor Flitwick’s remark seems to gnaw on her nerves, if the souring of her features is any indication, perhaps because of its delivery. A cheerful, objective assessment that piques Harry’s interest. Warding in his sixth year of schooling when the subject is scarcely mentioned? Harry has catalogued the library by now, excluding the Restricted section, and there are only three books on the basics of warding. To set up a ward with so little information…

“Rubbish. Wasting all that talent by…by charming off undergarments!”

Of course…trust his father to mastermind an innovative combination of magic like a true-born libertine. Harry can’t decide whether to be impressed or exasperated. “Seriously?”

“Oh, yes.” Snickering, Professor Flitwick nods above his tankard, then swigs the mead in two gulps. “They enchanted the Gryffindor entrance to vanish the undergarments of any female who passed through. Setting the specifications for the vanishing charm was difficult on its own, but anchoring the gender identification ward was a stroke of genius. Minerva was the fourth victim when she was called to solve the issue.”

A low rising sound filters in Harry’s ears. It comes from deep inside Professor McGonagall’s chest, and it isn’t a human sound, both snarl and yowl. Curious, fascinated, Harry peers at the rippling cords in her neck, at the seamless mutation in her genetic makeup, natural as breathing.

“I don’t know who was more appalled by that. Minerva, or your father when he realized his Head of House was…bare as the day she was born under her robes. James spent most of his detention
bemoaning the fact that he forgot to add an age restriction to the ward schema.”

By the end, Professor Flitwick is in stitches, wiping off tears, and that feral sound has evolved into hissing.

“Don’t remind me, Filius. It was what earned him an additional month of scrubbing toilets. Blasted boy…”

She’s bristling, spitting Gaelic curses under her breath. Harry has the terrible urge to pay her back for all the teasing. Fair is fair, after all.

Brows creased, rubbering his chin between two fingers, he gazes into the fire with the vacant gaze of one deep in thought. “Wouldn’t the ward overload and collapse, though? It would be better if—”

“Morgana’s freezing naked arse.” She curses thickly, then curses some more for cursing out loud, and Professor Flitwick gurgles something unintelligible, coughing, strangled by his own laughter. Her glare is slitted ire, piercing neon green, a spastic twitch on the corner of her eye. “So help me, Harry, if you’re thinking of improving upon that…that—”

“I’m joking, Professor.” Harry laughs, lifts his hands high, reddish-brown oblations delicately held inside his fists.

The motion draws her gaze, smothering her anger until it mellows into warmth. She flicks her eyes to the fire, a wet flutter of ache, simmering under her lashes. “Shall we?”

They fall silent and move as one. Harry watches as fire licks dead fragments off their hands, grows and blazes, seethes white-hot with the toll of their sacrifice. This heat is lucent, doesn’t speak of destruction or seek to gorge on flesh, another kind of fire. It crawls over his skin, laps at his face, pulls him closer and wraps around him like a mother mourning her child. He shivers, sees bodies at the zenith of the pyre, mouths smiling even as they are burning, calling voiceless and empty of words.

“Hello, Lily. It is lovely to see you again, my dear.”

Professor Flitwick speaks softly, quietly, but it startles him like a scream ripped from a bleeding throat. His hands clench, grasping at smoke and cinders, crushing them against his skin, under his fingernails. “Are they—?”

“What remains of their impression upon the world.”

That same inflection, soft, quiet, screaming in his ears. “Oh. I thought…” Harry feels cheated, and yet…relieved. Souls summoned, only to burn in fire, to be consumed by the living. No. Not right. He’s had his fill…he’s chock-full of soul.

“We didn’t tell you because they don’t always appear, and we didn’t want to give you false hope.”

It is Professor McGonagall who answers what goes unspoken, but Professor Flitwick who hears what lies beneath.

“It is possible to summon them from beyond the veil tonight…for a price.” He pauses, chugs on his tankard as if mead can incinerate the taste of what he’ll say off his tongue. “A soul for a soul.”

Black as the char on his hands. He more than knows, more than—

“I understand.”
Fingers clasp his shoulder, gripping firmly yet gentle, stroking his skin above layers of fabric, many questions in her touch. “They might not be what you want, but they’re still James and Lily as the world knows them.” A smile brushes her lips, though it is complex, matted with regret, brimming with those questions from which she can only ask one. “Would you like to say anything before they fade?”

Harry shakes his head. Words are meaningless if they fuel this fire that burns smiles and forges soulless impressions from their ashes. With fists clenched tight, nails black-sullied and cutting into papery skin, he watches as flame swallows bodies and mouths and buries them in smoldering coals. From one moment to the next, magic suffuses the stillness of the night, something howling, something other, a beat of instinct at the border of his perception—

Abyss between worlds, fathomless void, thrumming shadow—a jigsaw of eyes, polychromous irises, many-shaped pupils, and an orchestra of voices, guttural sounds, beasts on the prowl. A horde of spirits, a swarm of sidhe, a throne of mounted hunters and a pack of hounds rushing at their feet. Blood-drinkers, flesh-eaters, seeking prey and sowing savagery as they devour the earth.

His blood runs cold. His heart hammers against his ribcage in a bruising tempo as if to remind him it is still there. Stiffly, Harry flexes his arm and grabs the tankard by his knee, throws his head back and floods his mouth with the tang of sweet mead, burning away the cold, no more howling, no more other in the world. Bless the house-elves for making even non-alcoholic mead retain the warming effects. “Did you…see that?”

“The Wild Hunt.” The way his lips twist up and stretch back, jaw snapping with blood-promise…that black-lined grin, the eagerness in it…all goblin bloodthirst and hot-crossed fangs.

Despite his prior disquiet, Harry finds himself amused by the professor’s desire to join the Hunt. “I thought they were myths.”

“By the mother Danu. If only it were so.” Professor McGonagall sips slowly, knuckles white and clutching at her tankard like a lifeline. Garnet slathers across her cheeks the more she drinks, reddens the flesh of her lips. She sighs, body loose and red as her tongue. “If we hadn’t worn the rune on our skin, we’d be taken by the Hunt come next Samhain.”

Ah. There’s a vague recollection about Sæwelō and why they must smear it on their face in the beginning of the feast. One of the rune’s many symbolisms and uses. ‘Protection from malicious entities’ isn’t just a euphemism for pedophiles or superstition then. “That sounds…unpleasant.”

Professor McGonagall gasps in horrified awe and Professor Flitwick roars with laughter.

“You have a talent for understatement.” A compliment wrapped in an insult. Professor Flitwick raises his tankard in a toast, and Harry returns it with a mad grin. Like knows like. “Sidhe are gods and not gods, monstrous, beautiful, all of them beyond mortal ken. We hold the feast in the Great Hall because they can’t pass through Hogwarts’ wards, so the children are safe in the castle, but we’re just beyond them here. Not that the Winter King will ever ride into Hogwarts…the sidhe only came near us because they were drawn to the ritual fire.”

He throws the dregs of his mead into the fire, conjures five logs with one spin of his wand and stokes the dying flames, then refills his tankard. “I’ve told Albus many times that we’d be perfectly safe to celebrate outside as long as we don’t cross the wardline, but he keeps insisting that children will wander despite our warnings.”

Harry frowns. “Won’t the rune protect them even if they do?”
“It will.” An acerbic grunt, broadcasting exactly what he thinks of the Headmaster’s motives. “But that’s Albus’ excuse for turning Samhain into muggle Halloween. He just doesn’t want to bring back the rites—”

Abruptly, they still. Professor McGonagall swivels toward the forest, magic lashing around her, a coiling whip of violence, and Professor Flitwick…is wielding a wickedly curved battle axe as if it weighs nothing. There’s the sound of leaves rustling, the distinct, faint reverberation of hooves through soil. A centaur emerges from the dense foliage, and the professors exhale in relief, battle magic and weapons dissipating.

“Firenze!” Professor McGonagall regards him with an expression the Weasley twins see at least once per week. Disapproving, irritated, and fondly resigned. “You gave us a scare. Coming after the Hunt just passed us by…”

Firenze keeps quiet, even though his walk slows, languor in his gait, in the dip of his head as he acknowledges them—but his eyes are bright and electrifying as a thunder-streaked sky.

Harry waits for him to settle between the professors and observes him closely. His hair varies between vanilla-white and honey-gold, long enough to reach the base of his spine where human fuses with horse. It is striking and unnatural, but then again, there’s nothing natural about him, from the pointed tips of his ears to the thick rope of his tail. He can pass for human from the waist up in the far distance, but that is where the similarities end. His bone structure is more pronounced, his eyes more fulgent, his build more solid. He is all angles and corded muscle. Still, Firenze is a rather tame creature compared to the blood-chilling otherness of the Wild Hunt.

Minutes pass by and he still doesn’t talk or drink. Harry watches him from across the fire—watches as the centaur gives his tankard a slow roll, and another, feeling his way around the ceramic texture, the cool surface. What kind of thoughts cross his mind? What kind of images? Why is he—

Firenze drains his tankard all at once. The sound of clay hitting the turf is dull but still deafening in the heavy silence.

“Harry Potter.” Light tenor, mellifluous notes, a nocturne of a voice. “Neptune shines on you.”

Neptune…? Astronomy doesn’t interest him beyond its correlation with potions and rituals, and so Harry hasn’t plunged deep into the subject. Neptune, though…it signifies dreams, illusions, deceptions, the arts. Is that supposed to be a hint that centaurs possess the gift of seeing into souls and divining the true nature of people? Harry stares up at him, perplexed, guarded. “Is that…a bad thing?”

“Is the dream to blame for what the dreamer sees?”

Firenze casts down a half-lidded gaze, perplexes him even more with his cryptic speech and non sequiturs. An apology for seeing what should not be seen? Or accusation for the choice made before knowing what that choice would bring? Blame, he says…someone must carry the blame then. Between the two of them, there is only one with fire in his dreams. Harry sighs. “I’m not familiar with how centaurs see things, but…things just happen sometimes, you know.”

“Some things are. Some things should be.”

And I’m not one of these things, hm? He understands now. Centaurs see things as they are born to be, and Harry…he’s an anomaly, self-warped, dissonant to his nature. He doesn’t know what he is, only what he wants to be. A half-smirk slices along the left side of his face. “And some things aren’t?”
“Some things are when they should not be. Some things are what they must not be.”

*Oh, bold.* Laughter erupts from his lungs, richly amused and unrestrained. He’s never met anyone quite like Firenze. So abstruse, and yet so blatant. Someone who denies his existence to his face without the merest change of pitch or blink of eyes. Centaurs can’t cope with unforeseen change, can they? It is almost enough to pity them. *Almost*—because Harry has no pity for those who seek to control him, no matter how well-meaning, how honest their intentions, and Firenze, in his own misguided way, seeks to burden him with *foretold purpose.*

When he’s calm again, Harry stares into that electric blue with knowing eyes. He may not have pity to give, but he can muster empathy. “You only see things that can be then?”

The centaur’s gaze is rising to the adumbral vastness spread over the sky. Firenze slants his neck far back until he is nothing but a baring of throat and gold skin. “That which is on high is that which is below.” Then star-blue is falling. “That which is below is as that which is on high.” His voice is still light and melodious, the flash of thunder in his eyes still bright and cracking. “I see nothing more and nothing less.”

Harry wonders if centaurs know that half the things they see are gone but still coming. What future is there in dead stars? “And what do you see on the earth that is not reflected in the sky?”

“Mars should be bright tonight, and though you choose to extinguish the fire, you are allowed only embers, not ashes.” Firenze lets him glimpse into the future. There’s an edge of warning in his bright, still eyes, but it is glazed with the shadow of stars that have died eons and light years away. “Embers…dangerous to wake.”

*Embers…?* Harry laughs again. *You’re so wrong and so right.* No matter how many times they gaze at the stars, won’t the sun descend, burning, and blot them out? *No, Firenze. I’m in the fire.* What is born in fire will feed on it…not die of it. Fire red as blood, red as molten soul.

A little at a time, elbows and knees uncurl, muscles and tendons flexing until Firenze unfurls to his full height. “The sun must rise in the west. Remember, Harry Potter.” With one small bow of his head, the centaur disappears into the starless dark of the forest.

Silence, then Professor Flitwick snorts. “And that is why centaurs are never invited to festivals.”

Harry’s lips twitch, laughter trapped between his teeth, threatening to spill and send him into convulsions. “Have I mentioned how appealing Egypt sounds lately?” *The sun always rises in the east, Firenze. Why should I stay where fate ordains? I owe you nothing.*

Professor Flitwick nods sagely. Straight-faced. “Sphinxes do tell better riddles than centaurs.”

“Oh, Filius.” Professor McGonagall refills her mead and slugs it straight back. She all but hisses, partly in pleasure, partly in exasperation. “Please stop corrupting him. The world doesn’t need another with your…unique sense of humor.”

And Harry can’t help it any longer—he dies laughing.

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*Samhain.* *Samhain.* An anathema…the day that should have been his ultimate triumph, and instead…his ultimate defeat. It scalds his tongue, cauterizes his nerves, only to be birthed anew, made sharper.

Voldemort stands rigid and quiet, blood sizzling in veins and arteries, rage snaking around pupils and teeth and edging them into something inhuman. Raw and slick and dripping with venom. If only he
can erase this day…if only he can rip it from the mind of the world and sink it in oblivion…

His feet begin moving while he yet burns with all the things he’s been feeling for the past ten years, wretched things, loathsome. It is a stroke of luck that Harry Potter frolics in the woods with Minerva, or he might have been tempted to do something…unfortunate. Voldemort can feel his control slipping as he walks along the corridors, each step leaden, imprints of killing intent on rough-hewn stone. A two-legged berserker, a seething mass of magic and murderous urges.

When he reaches the third floor, his mood plummets to new lows. Nothing…there’s nothing to impede him. No alarm or identification wards, no security spells, no hidden traps. Still, Voldemort inhales a deep, calming breath, then yanks the poorly locked door open with one push of his magic. It is so disgustedly, so pathetically easy that he feels insulted to even draw his wand, and what lurks inside—

A Cerberus. A fucking guard dog. Voldemort grits his teeth, ignoring the slavering beast towering overhead and ramming all three of its heads against the barrier he erects. He inhales another breath that calms nothing—not his rage, not his blood, not his magic—and slowly walks out. His back meets the wall hard, stone cold and grazing against the nape of his neck, but rage melts like lava in his bloodstream. Thirteen ways of killing that infernal dog pass through his mind in a flash. Killing it is laughably facile. Bypassing it without inflicting injury, though…

Contemplating, his gaze lowers to the potion belt coiled around his waist, loaded with the potions Severus delivered last week. Poisons, restorative draughts, healing salves, enhancement serums, useless for this purpose. A loud hiss rings in the silent corridor, intensifying as it comes closer, bringing with it the perfect solution. Ah…yes, the caretaker’s cat. Luck seems to favor him tonight. How unexpected, this cursed day.

Voldemort stuns the hissing ball of fur once it turns around the corner, plucks one vial of Draught of Living Death from his belt, and spells it into the cat’s stomach. He tosses the feline into the dog’s room, and listens as he waits for the absence of sound. The Cerberus is deep under the effects of the potion when he strides inside, jaws wet and red with blood, slumbering over the trapdoor he noticed on his first venture. Moving it to the side takes only scant seconds, then he is in the chamber underneath with one leap.

Emptiness greets him. Empty space wherever he goes. Empty room after empty room after empty room. Nothing…there’s nothing to find. Snarling, Voldemort retraces his steps, administers the antidote to the guard dog and slams the door shut on his way out.

He’s well beyond rage at this point. Hot blood turns cold, numbs his limbs and brain, fills his body and thoughts with terrible frost. What is that old fool thinking? What is his endgame? Luring him to Hogwarts with the promise of eternal life, and yet… Is this corridor a ruse? Is the stone even in the castle? If so…where? In the old fool’s office under charms that’ll take ages to break? Because it can’t be…it isn’t here.
“Excuse me, Professor Snape? May I have a moment of your time?”

Would you leave if I said no? Will it even matter? If there’s one thing that Severus can’t stand about Potter, besides the boy’s cursed existence, it is his smiles, like the one he wears at this moment. Even if Severus turns him away, that smile suggests it will not be the end of whatever insidious plot Potter is hatching with him in its yolk. That devil-child wants something from him—wants it badly—and he will stop at nothing until Severus gives it.

“What is it, Potter?” His voice lacks inflection and his face is devoid of emotion. It doesn’t escape Severus that he treats Potter the same as when he lies prostrate before the Dark Lord—and lies, lies, lies. “And make it brief.”

Potter nods, graciously, smile splitting broader, as if Severus’ acquiescence is the first nail to his coffin. “I had an interesting conversation with the Sorting Hat. It mentioned the Mind Arts, you see, and I was naturally curious about them. They’re a fascinating branch of magic.”

The Mind Arts? Teeth bite the insides of his cheeks until they tear the soft flesh. Warm blood floods his mouth, bitter as the beast eating his own heart. The bloody Mind Arts? You want me—? “Filius referred you to me?”

Smiling, always… Potter keeps smiling that infernal smile, a full display of white teeth and angelic grace. “Professor Flitwick spoke highly of you.”

I bet he did. Severus regrets ever collaborating with Filius on that unpublished thesis about the principles of Occlumency. It had been too intriguing, too enticing to pass up the opportunity of examining how the inborn mental defences of goblins differed from human methods of obscuring the mind. If not for his traumatic experience with Lupin in his teenage years, he might have been tempted to take it one step further and study the alien barriers that resulted from the selfdom of wolf-instinct.

Despite all that, what right does Filius have to involve him in Potter’s magical development? Just because the part-goblin can’t teach the boy doesn’t mean that duty falls to Severus. Albus is also a master of the Mind Arts, and much more amenable to interact with Potter on a steady basis.

“Stop trying to butter me up, Potter. No amount of flattery will convince me to teach you the Mind Arts.” His voice remains toneless, his expression stony with denial as he rejects that smile and the machinations hiding in it. “If you’re determined to learn mind magic, your best bet is to take it up with the Headmaster.”

“What will then?” Potter’s smile slips off his face, and in its place, there is cool calculation, cunning, a bargain, the last portion of Severus’ speech disregarded as if never spoken. So very Slytherin that it breaks through Severus’ self-imposed detachment. Potter seems to know—he knows the distance between them can only be as far or as close as his mouth stretches. “You’re the Head of Slytherin, Professor Snape. I’d be surprised if you had agreed just because I gave praise for your accomplishments or because of who I am.”

Who I am translates into who my mother was. It is deliberate and more than a little vicious. A cruel reminder, a provocation. Eyes open, mercilessly staring, nothing but green…green. Severus stares back into his—her—eyes, near sightless, looking through thousands of broken glasses, each sweet memory, now turned bitter.
“Indeed.” Severus smiles, but it is smeared with that bitter memory, and if the boy knows more than he sees, it will become more bitter. He already knows too much…he can’t be allowed to see more than that… What choice is there but to teach him?

*Well played, Potter.* Severus nods once, hardens his spine and pours steel in his voice. “You will never experiment with potions outside of class until I deem you competent to brew without supervision. I warn you now, it will not be before your sixth year.”

Potter, too, nods as he smiles, satiety on the seam of his lips, red like strawberries, sweet like the fruit of his scheme. Only one thing holds Severus back. The boy won’t be smiling once he realizes what exactly he’s asked for.

“You will never raise wand or fist against my Slytherins unless in self-defence. Even then, it will be nothing irreversible or humiliating.”

Another nod, another smile.

“You will follow instruction exactly as it is given. Occlumency is a very precise art that takes years of study to progress beyond the most rudimentary level, even for those with aptitude for the Mind Arts. Legilimency can be less precise but no less demanding, and much more dangerous should you misuse it.”

A low hum, more curious, less apprehensive. Potter’s smile wanes, and Severus consoles himself with the fact that at least the boy is serious and willing to take heed when it is called for. Just for that, Severus finds himself explaining the why of it.

“The Memory Charm was originally created to mask the unfortunate results of heavy-handed Legilimency attacks. It didn’t undo the damage to the victim, simply made it impossible to identify the culprit.”

Potter’s smile vanishes halfway through, and by the time Severus finishes, the boy understands how *damaging* it can be, despite the absence of details, or perhaps because of it. Severus has witnessed the handiwork of the Dark Lord’s Legilimency too many times, and *still* shudders. The Cruciatus Curse can break the mind but isn’t the deeply violating torture of being *seen*, being stripped to the innermost thought, then torn asunder.

He breathes in, thrusts old-felt sensations into the dark matter of his nucleus, breathes out. Potter is watching him, patiently, silent, waiting. Severus lays down the last condition, and just…*breathes*.

“You will never ask me personal questions or seek to form bonds beyond what is strictly within the parameters of teacher-student interaction.”

“Agreed.” Quiet, unsmiling, a promise. Lily’s eyes, and yet…too dark, too seeing.

“I will think about it,” he finally says. Albus needs to approve before Severus can agree.

“Thank you, Professor Snape.”

Potter bows his head but still doesn’t smile, and for that small concession, Severus is grateful.

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Severus barges into Albus’ office and lays it on him without breaking stride. “Potter just asked me to teach him the Mind Arts.”

Slowly, Albus puts his quill down, lacing his fingers, brows drawn together. “The Mind Arts,
Severus?“ Skeptical but not dismissive, more likely at the boy’s choice of tutor than the request itself. “Where would he even learn of such obscure magic?”

Not buying it for a second, Severus scoffs. “You can thank the Sorting Hat for that. Apparently, they had a nice, long chat about magic instead of…Sorting.”

Albus’ brows draw apart and rise high. One glance of sky-blue at the old piece of fabric, lying perfectly still and inanimate on top of the tallest shelf. Silence…no matter how hard Albus stares at it. Severus knows the wily artifact keeps the rip of its mouth shut on purpose. Amused, he watches the bizarre staring contest until Albus sighs and turns his gaze on him. His amusement dies at that bright, joyful gleam.

“You are intending to teach him?” It isn’t an observation or a statement or a question but something else entirely. Albus’ next words are oversaturated with what it fucking is. “I’m proud of you, my boy.”

A growl builds in his lungs, thrums in his veins, chafes across his tongue and crawls out like the blood-pulse of some feral beast as it writhes and gurgles in its death throes.

“Leave James Potter out of this, Albus. My reasons have nothing to do with any notions of catharsis you might entertain. I took a vow to protect…Lily’s son.” A weapon her son is unaware of and yet masterfully wields. Severus dreads what that boy would do if he were to come by this knowledge. His main reason is to control what Potter knows, to prevent him from ever knowing. “Can you imagine the damage that fool boy might do to himself if left alone to toy with mind magic of all things?”

Nothing Severus says can dwindle the bright-blue of Albus’ conviction. “Certainly, but that is not all, is it?” Not letting go, gleefully gnawing, an old dog with a new chew toy.

Tired of being angry, of being played with, Severus shoots a flat stare at him. “I have no desire to go traipsing into Potter’s mind, but it might prove to be…insightful, given the circumstances.”

Contrary to Severus’ expectations…that succeeds where all else failed. The bright gleam of Albus’ eyes dims, so dim that it eclipses all light and joy until only shadow remains. Bottomless, still waters. A well of deep disapproval and sorrow.

“That approach is not recommended without dire cause, Severus. There are gentler ways to teach the Mind Arts, ways that don’t involve the invasive use of Legilimency.”

What. Severus’ brain takes pause, rewinding their conversation, trying and failing to place what triggers this type of reaction. “I thought you would approve, Albus.” It doesn’t make sense. Albus always wants to know. Legilimency isn’t one of his usual methods, true…at least never actively, but he does use it passively when he deems that the end outweighs the means. He should be jumping at the chance, especially since he won’t have to be the perpetrator…he should be…unless… “Why are you—what do you know? What are you not telling me?”

A sigh follows in the wake of his explosive temper, as if Severus is an adult who can’t yet fathom what it means being one.

“I merely do not wish you to alienate the boy, Severus, if not for his sake, then for yours. Harry respects you—he came to you for help. Despite our…differences, Filius must have mentioned my proficiency in the Mind Arts, and yet the boy chose you.” Albus peers at him over the edges of his glasses, opaque blue, still impenetrable, another kind of dimness in his eyes. “Are you willing to throw that away for the sake of an old grudge against his father? For paranoia?”
A bolt of lightning strikes, with Severus’ body as its rod, one billion volts running wild on every inch of skin. “I told you not to—” Severus bites his tongue, leashing his fury even as he thrashes with its aftershocks. “You’re not fooling me, Albus, but keep your secrets like you always do.” No longer able to withstand Albus’ pathological need for secrecy, this bid for redemption, this barefaced mockery, he moves to leave but stops at the door. “And it’s not paranoia when I know I’m right.”

Severus descends the stairs two and three at a time, almost flying over the staircase, itching to get away and just…away. The gargoyle is grinding closed behind him, and he hasn’t taken more than ten steps away, when magic seizes hold of his body with a vice-like grip, hard as obsidian, cold as shadow, dragging him into the nearest secluded alcove.

“What did the old fool want, Severus? Was it about the stone? Did you find where he keeps it?” The Dark Lord’s voice comes fast, impatient, lisp ing. He is pacing up and down, back and forth, rage and the prelude of the Cruciat us in the oppressive force of his magic.

Warily, Severus flattens his back against the wall, still trembling, barely breathing. Fear prowls inside his mind, rips into fury with sharp talons and lets it bleed out. “No, my Lord. It was about…Potter.” Everything halts the moment the boy’s name leaves the confines of his mouth—the Dark Lord’s pacing, his rage, his magic. Severus swallows once. “The boy requested I teach him the Mind Arts.”

The Dark Lord doesn’t ask where the boy learned of mind magic, or why he came to Severus, merely stands there for long seconds.

Staring.

Scrutinizing.

Dissecting.

“See that you do then.” Low, deep, no hint of lisp. He sounds…pleased.

It makes no bloody sense, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that he is pleased. That…can’t be good. Severus swallows again, tongue emboldened by the cessation of cold rage, daring to step a little out of line. “Is it…wise, my Lord?”

The Dark Lord smiles, as if the question amuses him, a sardonic quirk of lips. That…is even worse. “I need you to keep a close eye on the boy for as long as you can, Severus. If he wants to learn the Mind Arts, then that is what you’ll teach him, with the slow method.” His smile draws blood to the surface and sucks the life out of it. “Do not fail me.”

All that is left of Severus’ daring is the Dark Lord’s pleasure as it gorges itself on the remnants of his boldness, the vestiges of his lifeblood.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Potter. In my office, now.”

Without waiting for Potter’s response, certain the boy will follow, Severus walks out of the Great Hall and heads for the dungeons. Light footsteps register behind him, and he quickens his pace, eager to be done with this chore as soon as possible. Once outside his office, Severus holds the door ajar, then closes it when Potter passes through. The boy knows to take his seat and wait silently. Thank the gods for small favors.
Severus leans against his desk, eyes sharp and focused on the boy, uncomfortably reminded of the Dark Lord’s order. “Lessons will be once a month on Saturdays. You may take notes, but do not interrupt me during the lecture. Questions will be permitted only at the beginning and end of each session.”

Taking out his writing implements, Potter nods. “Understood, Professor.”

Efficient, sparse in motions and words, just like Severus prefers his students. He wonders how closely Potter watches him, to be mindful of his pet peeves down to the last one. Spy, he thinks, and recoils at their similarities. The only difference between them is motivation. Severus wants to survive. Potter wants to exploit.

“There is no assigned textbook, for the Mind Arts are many and touch upon various branches of magic. Some would contest that only Occlumency and Legilimency should be counted as the Mind Arts, but mind magic is not as narrow a field. Every piece of magic that affects the mind should be included in the Mind Arts. The Memory Charm and the Imperius Curse are two such examples, among others.” He casts down an inquisitive glance, already knowing the answer but needing to have it verified before he goes on. “Filius explained the general concept behind Occlumency and Legilimency, I assume?”

Pausing in his note-taking, Potter lifts his head, only to lower it in a curt nod. “Yes, Professor.”

“We will begin with Occlumency then.” Even as he speaks, Severus runs an inventory in his mind. He’s missing some vital ingredients, and the ones that don’t come easy or cheap either. What a mess. “There are different ways of learning the art of occluding your mind, but the one that yields the best results is through the use of the Mind Catcher potion. It is a master-level potion that very few are capable of brewing, and so most turn to other methods that take less time but are…quite unpleasant. Fortunately for you, I can brew a perfect batch each month for as long as you require it.”

Again, Potter’s head ascends, this time without Severus’ prompting. There’s something clinical in his eyes, in the way they assess Severus’ posture and evaluate what is being said, what is left unsaid. Wryly, he smiles, and Severus knows that the boy knows the chagrin in that fortunately.

“The Mind Catcher allows you to fall into a magically-induced trance where the brain becomes disconnected from external stimuli. Clearing your mind of thought is infinitely easier with the potion’s assistance. Eventually, you will be able to slip into that state with simple meditation.”

It is implied that he will be vulnerable while under the potion. Better than the alternative, though… the boy seems to know that, too. An upside, Severus supposes. Potter’s attempts to eliminate his vulnerability will probably be diverting.

“Occlumency is not some fancy way of building defences in your mind. It is the subtle layering of your thoughts and memories. You coat them with what you want others to perceive while the base remains the same. If you’re thinking about something, and you don’t want them to glean your true opinion, you weave another layer over your true thoughts. If you’re reminiscing about an event, and you don’t want them to know what happened, you spin another scenario over the true memories.”

Fascination glints in his eyes—two chips of green, and inside them, tenacity annealing like hot glass. Severus can’t begrudge him his awe. The Mind Arts are the summit of cerebral power.

“You’re still letting them see what you think, but not what you think. Once you master Occlumency, layering becomes as instantaneous as breathing. There are steps that must be followed in precise sequence to achieve mastery, but we’ll talk about them after the potion is made.” Which is going to cost a bloody fortune. Severus stifles a sigh and wraps up the lesson. “Any questions?”
Potter smiles that sweet, devilish smile, and Severus can guess that whatever will come out of his mouth will be instigation for homicide.

“I would like to offer compensation for the potion ingredients.”

Perhaps, he should have begun with Legilimency. If the boy can read him by interpreting body posture and tone of voice… “Naturally.” The word is smooth, unaccented, enshrouded in Occlumency. Potter keeps staring at him, sweet-smiling, expectant. Oh… Severus is such an imbecile. The boy can’t read him… he’s just as fascinated by the potion itself as he is by the Mind Arts and seeks to extract the knowledge of its creation. Severus gnashes his teeth and gives him what he wants. At this point… there’s no point anymore. “And, yes, Potter, if by some miracle, you ever attain the expertise to brew such high-level potions, I will teach you the Mind Catcher.”

“I appreciate it, Professor Snape.”

“Get out of here now.”

A scintilla of ash-blond hair catches in the torchlight when the door creaks open. Severus waits until Potter disappears down the corridor before he confronts his skulking student.

“Do you need anything, Mr. Malfoy?”

Startled, Draco shifts under his scrutiny, grimacing. “No, Professor. I was just on my way to the Great Hall.”

Were you now? Or were you hoping to see Potter punished for some imaginary misconduct? As amusing as the boy’s fixation with Potter has been in the beginning, it is starting to become… deleterious. It will not end well. Potter isn’t someone Draco can take on. In fact, Severus’ second stipulation for teaching Potter the Mind Arts was made because of Draco’s lack of self-preservation instincts. Even if he says this, though, it will do more harm than good. Still, he needs to say something, considering the Malfoys’ imminent guest. Potter is one thing… the Dark Lord is another thing altogether.

“Draco.” Severus calls him by his given name, softens his voice, makes it personal. “I’d advise against going home for Yule this year.”

“Mother wrote the same.” His face scrunches up, displeased as he is confused. “Do you know what is going on?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with.” Severus waves him away, but the stubborn crease of the boy’s forehead tells him that his warning hasn’t been received. The tops of Draco’s ears and his cheeks flush with red color and he parts his mouth—

“I mean it, Draco. Stay out of this.” Mulishly, the boy stays quiet, and Severus turns around, a vicious migraine pounding behind his temples. “And for Merlin’s sake, stop antagonizing people left and right. You might live to regret it.”

Lunch is almost over by the time Harry returns to the Great Hall. He doesn’t much care for missing one meal out of three, but he does care for the treacle tart Anthony slides toward him.

Anthony grins as Harry takes the first bite. “Did the great Harry Potter, vanquisher of dark lords and slayer of riddles, get his first detention?”

If only you knew, Anthony. Harry chews slowly, suppressing a snort at the back of his throat, on the
precipice of laughter. Riddles... What an awful pun, no matter how inadvertent. Padma is about to make some half-playful, half-taunting comment, as is common for these two, but is interrupted by the Gryffindors’ arrival.

“Hi, Harry.” Neville sidles up to him, the stutter in his voice marginally diminished. “We, uh, saw Professor Snape take you to the dungeons, and we were...worried?” The boy is still nervous on the whole, but more on Harry’s behalf than the skittishness of before. Those self-help books must be helping.

Hermione smiles at Harry, her smile warm and full of gratitude, as if she can infer his line of thought. Before Harry can reply to either question, the old caretaker marches into the Great Hall, unmitigated wrath on his face, snarling and spitting mad and swinging his mop around.

“YOU!” He clambers up the Head Table, smashing plates and glasses under his shoes, and rams the spongy end of the cleaning implement against Hagrid’s chest. “You killed my cat!”

“Argus—”

Headmaster Dumbledore is the next person to suffer the wrath of the caretaker’s mop.

“NO! I won’t be silenced, Headmaster! His bloody beast murdered my precious! You should have never brought it in the castle!”

Finally gaining his bearings, though still blinking and dabbing the wet patch on his shirt, Hagrid rises up and bellows out in defence of his pet. “Fluffy’s jus a pup! He wouldn’ hur’ a fly!”

Blistering, head whipping back around, Mr. Filch glares at the half-giant with laser-like intensity. “Well, it did! My Mrs. Norris is dead, Hagrid! Your three-headed monster ate her!”

“Argus, please calm down.” The headmaster lifts his hands, palms open and unthreatening, half his attention on the out-of-control caretaker, half on the enraptured audience. “You are upsetting the students. We can discuss your cat’s passing in my office.”

Furious, crumbling with grief, Mr. Filch spits on the ruined tablecloth. “What is there to talk about, Headmaster?” Still, he lets himself be coaxed down and led away, muttering under his breath just loud enough to resound through the dead quiet of the chamber. “My cat’s dead…my poor Mrs. Norris…and he’s to blame!”

“Well.” Swallowing the last bite of his treacle tart, Harry hums. “It appears Hogwarts houses a Cerberus.”

Eyes wide, glassy with disbelief, Anthony jerks back, then goes still but for the opening of his mouth. Petrified. “A what now?”

Harry shrugs. “What else can a three-headed dog be?”

“But...but that’s insane.” Hermione is gripping Neville’s arm to the point of cutting off the poor boy’s circulation, staring at Harry like he is the one insane for taking the news so calmly. Neville just...stares at nothing, white as a ghost.

“Right.” Nodding to himself, Anthony reaches into his school bag for quill and parchment. “I’m gonna write to dad about this.”

Idly, Harry observes the commotion of the student body, clocking reactions and listening in to rampant speculation. “Miss Bones seems to have the same idea.” His gaze rests on the Slytherin table
where Malfoy mirrors Anthony’s frantic writing. These two…sides of the same coin. He shakes his head and laughs. “Little Draco, too.”

Dark eyes peek at him, curious, reassured by his calm unlike Hermione. “Why aren’t you more concerned?”

“We’ve been here for two months, Padma, and we’ve seen neither hide nor hair of the Cerberus.” Harry slings an arm around her shoulders, tilting his head at the Gryffindor table where the resident redheaded twins are being chewed out by their Prefect brother. “Unless you go looking for it, like the Weasley twins obviously did, you’re quite safe from it.”

Neville opens his mouth, closes it, then opens it again. “I…I still don’t feel s-safe.” Sweating, shaking like a leaf, one step forward, two steps back. So much for self-confidence.

Ah, well. He still has a long way to go. Harry smiles. “Don’t worry, Neville. It won’t be here for long either way.”
Lily Evans was a free spirit, a flower child. She was all about love and life and magic. She had fire in the palms of her hands, braided her hair with honeysuckle vines, wove round and round the maypole with her red ribbon on Beltane. She ran with unicorns and drank with goblins and sang with sirens. She read Thoreau and Tolkien, listened to the Beatles and Janis Joplin, liked to try new things, wild things. She wanted to travel to the ends of the earth and map the shape of the world with her bare feet.

If he knows one thing about Lily Evans through the prism of her memoirs, it is this: Mum…was a hippie.

Harry laughs and turns another page of his mother’s grimoire, although at this point the name is a bit of a misnomer. A medley is more accurate—all the curiosities that were Lily Evans, from brilliant tips for Potions and Charms to one-of-a-kind epiphanies to away-with-the-fairies theories, interspersed with short diary entries.

Diary, 31st October, 1974

Today’s lesson: Don’t do massive hair changes right before the ball even if you totally want a reimage and think the most wicked new robes you could find on sale aren’t going to look right unless you’ve got primo curls.

I mean, at least it was Sevvie that learned it but how am I supposed to dance with him at the ball now? His hair is so big I can’t even get close enough to tell him I feel bad about it.

Second lesson: Don’t do perms. It doesn’t seem like it’s worth the risk. Maybe that’s the first lesson, after all...

The entry is followed by a plethora of potion ingredients in combinations that radiate an awfully experimental feel and the side note: Poor Sevvie. I don’t think his hair will ever lose that…luster. Maybe I can invent some sort of corrective potion?

Professor Snape with an afro…and not just… The thought that his oily, stringy hair may be the result of his mother’s last minute crack at a change of image is too much for Harry. He bursts out in gales of laughter, falling back against the mattress, the book sliding down his stomach as his muscles contract to the point of pain.

Abruptly, an ochre piece of parchment appears midair with an almost inaudible pop. Harry watches as it floats down to settle on top of his chest, caught off guard, but not worried. That pop in conjunction with his location can only be house-elf magic. Snatching it up, Harry swings his feet off the bed, his gaze roving over the scant lines, bemused when he reads the last one. What does P.S. I enjoy pepper imps mean? It better not be a jape at his age, or his height, or worse…something lewd.

Slipping his mother’s grimoire into his school bag, Harry flings it over his shoulder and goes down in search of a Prefect. The common room is chaos. Students run amok while trying to gather their belongings and say their goodbyes before the train’s departure. Which also begs the question…why would the headmaster request his presence just an hour before he is to leave the castle for the holidays?

As it turns out, thanks to the sixth year Prefect, ‘pepper imps’ is not a ribald joke but wizarding sweets, and the password for the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster’s office. Right
then and there, Harry realizes Rita Skeeter may not be off the mark when she so charmingly refers to Albus Dumbledore as a ‘barmy old codger’ in the majority of her articles.

Ten minutes later, he’s knocking on the door, the angles of his face sharp, the lines in his body taut with tension.

“Come in, Harry.”

*How did he know? Maybe…oh. The wards?* Useful to know, but potentially risky. What if he wants to take the Sorting Hat up on that chat without the headmaster’s knowledge? Will the wards record him crossing the doorstep? Technically, he will not be breaking any rules, even if the reasoning is flimsy at best. Still, he *was* invited and within his rights to visit.

And who uses someone’s first name with such casual familiarity when they’ve never even exchanged as much as a hello? Hagrid notwithstanding. Headmaster Dumbledore should be perfectly capable of grasping social cues. Harry knows he is…somewhat detached—the range of his personal boundaries, the extent of his trust issues—but even normal people would be affronted in this instance.

With slow, measured steps, Harry walks inside, taking stock of the gleaming silver bibelots, the rows of animated portraits, the perch of the sleeping Phoenix, the blue flare of the headmaster’s gaze.

“Come, take a seat. How are you, my boy?”

*My boy…?* The words cause a spasm of thigh muscle, a misstep, almost. Harry covers it up as he sinks into the chair. He can disregard the first intimate address, but that word… *boy*, he loathes. More than the possessive pronoun even. He can’t decide which is more degrading…the intention, or that habitual tint to his voice?

Smiling around clenched teeth, Harry stares at the headmaster, at eye level, but just between them. *Never make eye contact with a Legilimens* is the first lesson Professor Snape taught him. “Well, Headmaster. And you?”

“Quite well.” Headmaster Dumbledore smiles back, then pushes the bowl of sweets in front of him with an expression split between hope and no real expectation his offer will be accepted. “Sherbet lemon?”

Harry’s smile eases into something more natural, and fake. He shakes his head with that mild, polite mask donned on his face. “No, thank you.”

There’s a flicker of resignation as the headmaster retracts the bowl, but no surprise. He plucks one candy and pops it into his mouth. “You must be wondering why I called for you.”

Despite the answer being self-evident, the headmaster falls silent, content to wait until he receives it verbally. Harry nods in silence just because he can and because he resents being goaded into choreographed moves. If the headmaster thinks to control the pace of the conversation with silent stares and forbearance, he will be sorely disappointed. Harry can play the waiting game, too.

Ten seconds, twenty, forty… Finally, “I have a Christmas present for you.”

*A…Christmas present?* This…is so wrong, so out of the sphere of what is appropriate given their relationship—or lack thereof—that Harry has only one thing to say. Cocking his head, frozen, he deadpans. “That is very kind of you, Headmaster, but it is not yet Christmas.”

“Oh, I didn’t want other students to think it was favoritism I was giving you a gift, my boy. This
Headmaster Dumbledore waves away all the wrongness as if it is but a minor triviality, and Harry wonders what kind of lenses his glasses are made of...and where can he get some. Because the old man’s perspective is certainly...something to be envied. Harry has never met someone like him—a person of the highest authority whose motto is ‘rules were made to be broken’, and shamelessly flaunting it, too. Half-dazed, half-impressed, he dips his chin. “Of course.”

“Splendid.” Beaming, he claps his hands, and a slim, rectangular parcel materializes out of thin air and onto Harry’s lap. “Your father left his invisibility cloak in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.”

_Dad’s_—? A bittersweet pang in his heart, then just as quickly a scythe of anger cuts through valves and sweetness. Only bitterness survives uncut. Four months...and only now...and he has the gall to call it a present...and use it well for what exactly? The headmaster can spurn the rules all he wants, but Harry can exploit them until it is more abuse than mere use. He stares at that spot between his bright blue eyes with unflinching focus. “Mr. Filch’s list states that invisibility cloaks are forbidden items.”

Those blue eyes widen by a fraction, but still bright, still beaming. “Does it? Argus keeps updating it. I am afraid I have lost track of what is in there. In any case, the cloak is yours to do with as you see fit. It is a family heirloom, after all.”

Still _urging_. If not for this insistence, this alarming interest, Harry would have used the cloak. It was his dad’s, his family’s, one of the few precious links remaining. Now he can’t, not before it is screened by Professor Flitwick, and even after that... No. Instinct screams _no_. The bitterness doubles in his heart, fills the hole that was sweetness.

“As you say.” Mechanically, he lifts the parcel off his lap and places it in his school bag. Not unwrapped, out of mind, to be opened when he’s far, far away from the headmaster’s scrutiny. When he straightens up, Headmaster Dumbledore grows silent again, but Harry has no more patience to spend for worthless games. “I apologize for my rudeness, and I mean no disrespect, Headmaster, but the train will depart in half an hour, so if that is all...?”

“Oh, yes.” He nods once, twice, smiling, but no sign of urgency now. “You are quite right, Harry, not rude at all. It is merely...I was led to believe you would have questions for me.”

_Ah_. Professor Flitwick’s prediction was wrong in the end, but...Harry’s desire to know the _why_ of it all is vanished. Like the professor said: what is done is done, and cannot be undone. What need is there for answers from a man who thinks it all a game of chess? Better no answers than stepping onto that chessboard. In the face of the headmaster’s invitation to this sordid game of souls and lives and fate, Harry can only smile back, showing even teeth and more fake feeling.

“I did have questions, but Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall provided me with answers. Nonetheless, I thank you for the offer and the gift.” A filament of something _genuine_ twines around that false-smile. Genuine, but acute. His acknowledgement rolls off metallic and sleek as it slides down the edge of a knife, and he offers sore gratitude for the _offer_. “You can be sure I will reciprocate your kind gesture on the twenty-fifth. It may be a little early, but Merry Christmas, Headmaster.”

Headmaster Dumbledore keeps silent, still, staring. As the intimations elongate into fine points and rasp across the silence, so does his victory. Steep-earned, just like those smiles.

It doesn’t end there, of course. Sometimes, last words cannot choose between vanquisher and
vanquished. Sometimes, they belong to the one who has the cruelty to speak them.

“What we may not like the truth, but we can only deny it for so long. I pray you never regret knowing it too soon. Merry Christmas, my boy.”

Albus watches the closed door for long minutes after the boy is gone, until Fawkes rouses from sleep and trills a heartbreaking note of lament. He sighs, turns away from the door and meets the black fire of the Phoenix’s eyes.

“I know, old friend. But who else can it be?” The walls of his throat are strained as he speaks, the creases around his mouth sunken. I have always known. His skin is steeped in regret and truth and fear.

Filius is right and wrong. There must be light and dark, yin and yang. Balance…even if it is an illusion, a lie that keeps the world from spiraling out of order. If you strip faith from humans…if you take away their beliefs…what is left to hold back their baser instincts?

Albus is afraid. He is afraid as he has been since the moment he awakened to the truth, and to the ultimate incomprehensibility of the truth. Man invented god to divide himself from evil. Is not the divided nature of magic a similar construction? He is afraid, and he knows it, but to know and to admit, even to himself—those, too, are divided.

“Who else but I?” He can only admit this, secretly bear the cross of his own sin.

He is too old, too tired, and for a moment…but someone must play this part, the soft side of opposition. Tom can be nothing but hard, nothing but the hammer. And when they are no more, there will be others to take their place, but for now…

For the boy to be tempered…for the people to keep believing…

“For the Greater Good.”

A shiver creeps down his spine the moment he whispers those words. Of all the things he should have said, all the things he could have known… Albus loves and hates them both. He shouldn’t—couldn’t—

He doesn’t want to be the anvil.

To the Dark Lord,

I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more.

R. A. B.

There is only rage and the agonized sounds of Lucius’ house-elf as it thrashes and crawls like an earthworm. Voldemort puts it out of its misery before the wretched creature can disturb the infested waters. He should have done the same twelve years ago. Another mistake…another piece of his soul…fucking misplaced. His fist closes around the fake locket, and he burns all over, inside out, a red haze beneath his lids, gold melting between his fingers. Is there only rage in his soul?

He vanishes the metal off his skin, rubs his face with hot palms, trying to understand where it all
went wrong. Regulus Black is dead, dragged by rotting arms to the bottom of the lake, one more putrid corpse among many. Long since revenged, and yet…the boy’s betrayal still stings, sharp enough to tear little holes and slip into layers of skin. He grunts, absorbs the barbed stingers, until it is too late to extract them. Poison spills into his bloodstream, harmless in small doses, but he takes in too much of it, enough to cause an allergic reaction. Just how many fucking mistakes—

One slow, deep breath. Voldemort breathes the blood-rage. In. Out. When he breathes no more red, his vision clear of the flaming haze, his mind begins turning again, searching for ways to rectify this latest mistake. Regulus’ house-elf should still be alive, and it is nigh impossible for his Horcrux to have been destroyed by house-elf magic. All he needs is to find that bloody creature and tear the location of Slytherin’s locket from its mind.

A Black can summon it…if only Bella wasn’t…but oh. Lucius’ wife is of Black blood, yes…Narcissa, that pretty little thing.

He laughs and sets the carcass of the house-elf on fire, apparating mid flame and laughter. Even pretty little things can have their uses.

A finger taps a flat rhythm against the desk, the sole sign of Voldemort’s discontent. Lucius stands ramrod stiff at the leftmost corner of his study, grey eyes studiously locked on the fireplace, as if staring at it hard enough will speed his wife’s return from the Sunday soirée at the Parkinsons’ manor. The floo roars to life ten minutes later, and Narcissa steps through, wand flicking ash and soot off her robes with practiced, quick motions, only to freeze in place at his presence. Her waist bends low, a lithe, feminine bow, her gaze just as low, ever the proper, obedient wife.

“How may I serve, my Lord?” Her voice is raw honey, pleasing, with a globule of bitterness, as if she is obliging a mad emperor, and how she speaks his title is a lick of deference. Her manner is polite, distant, demure.

Narcissa never raises her eyes, never meets his, but Voldemort can read the subtle signs. Red eyes follow her every movement—the arc of her spine as she bends over the mini-bar, the twist of her wrists as she fills his glass with firewhiskey, the way her skirt glides over her knees as she walks. She doesn’t like him in her home, beside her husband, near her son. His presence is an aberration, a stain she wishes to erase. So unlike her elder sister, so easy to break.

Amused, he brings the glass to his lips and takes a slow sip, staring at her through the thin, expensive crystal. “I need to gain entrance to the Black ancestral home, Narcissa.”

She goes stiff as her husband. “I am afraid I will be of no use to you, my Lord.” Voldemort slams the glass down, amber liquid splashing over the cherry wood, and she hurries to placate him with useless words. “Grimmauld Place was sealed after aunt Walburga’s passing. The Black wards denied entrance to all but the Head of our House, and grandfather Arcturus passed away earlier this year. I was informed at the reading of his will that the title would fall to cousin Sirius as the next in line to inherit. Until his death, no one can contest his claim.”

The Black wards…? They should allow entrance to anyone with even a drop of Black blood in their ancestry, like all old family wards, unless otherwise adjusted. But there’s no current family Head to dictate who has access and who doesn’t. Why would they deny—ah, tied to the family ring, are they? An ingenious failsafe. He should have expected this from Arcturus Black. Voldemort remembers him…the formidable Black Head, the only man who dared reject him face to face…and survived the consequences of his choice. Even from beyond the grave, Arcturus still defies him.

Voldemort sighs, empties his glass with one swallow. “Wasn’t Sirius Black disowned?” Come to think of it…where is that pathetic rat hiding? Wormtail better have his wand when he finds him—and he will find him.
Narcissa darts forward to refill his glass even as he holds it aloft, pouring the color of Black eyes in his drink, a rich, vinous mauve that intoxicates as it swirls. He lifts the glass higher, and her eyes sink deeper. Will she fall in her reflection? No. She isn’t enamored with her own image…she’s fleeing from the blood-rage in his eyes. Foolish. The rim of the glass is circular—a circle has no endings, no beginnings. No escape. He doesn’t need to see into her eyes for her lips to speak the truth that flows on the surface.

“Grandfather Arcturus disagreed with aunt Walburga’s decision. His will was very clear on the matter. Should cousin Sirius be released from Azkaban, he is to be reinstated to the family and assume Headship of House Black. Only he could take control of the Black wards and unseal Grimmauld Place.”

Humming under his breath, possible solutions rushing through his mind, he twirls his glass but doesn’t drink. Despite his confidence in unraveling the ties that bind the ring to the wards, stealing the damned thing is unfeasible. The goblins have upgraded their security after Quirinus’ poor attempt to rob the bank this summer, and he’s certain the ring is kept in the Black vault. There will be blood protections, goblin enchantments, runic wards, not to mention the bloody dragon. Compared to that, breaking into Azkaban to take Sirius Black out of the equation is far more feasible. “And in the event of his demise?”

Her gaze drifts lower as she leans closer to her statue of a husband. “The next in line would be cousin Sirius’ heir.”

His mouth splits a margin, teeth keen and pressing against the flesh of his bottom lip. Does she think Lucius will provide protection from Voldemort? It will be so fucking easy to—

Voldemort throws his head back and tosses his drink down his throat, tastes fire and cursed blood, a violent, searing rage. “I grow weary of your evasions, woman.” Roughly spoken, guttural, at the end of his patience. “Speak the name of his heir.”

“Forgive me, my Lord.” For the first time, Narcissa raises her eyes. She’s jewel-eyed, soft-framed, red syrup on her tongue, a pretty little thing, a mirror of desire in fragile skin. That she chooses to meet his eyes at the apogee of his rage… Unbroken…begging to be… So unlike Bella. “Cousin Sirius’ heir is Harry Potter.”

Rage coils low in his abdomen, and he’s laughing madly. So that’s why. The name would have come from her mouth either way, but she likes it this way, staring at him, the slope of her back unbent. If she is to suffer his rage for the name, then she wants to be the cause, wants the rage to have purpose. She doesn’t like him in her home, and this is the only way to spite him for his presence. More daring in the wet little tip of her tongue than in Lucius’ spine. Black blood breeds true. Pity that Lucius’ blood runs through the veins of the son that came out of her body. Spineless, just like Abraxas.

“I see.” He drowns the embers of his laughter in Ogden’s finest, bidding her away before he bends the bold line of her spine, rakes his hand down her back and shreds spite from delicate bone. Her stare glares like a violet bruise through the shimmer of the glass, creates illusions of light and urges long gone. The urge to take her tongue between his teeth and spill her blood over her husband’s desk. She doesn’t like him, no…but she will like that…to be taken down to the floor, to claw her way on top, then be pushed down again, until the fight turns to flesh-burn and the beat of blood is but an echo of the rage. “Leave us, Narcissa.”

Her lashes flutter once, and again, startled, taken aback by this bloodless, painless dismissal. She stares at him for a long moment, longer than she should, then draws her gaze away, adopting the prim façade befitting her station. The transition is smooth like the curve of her back, but there’s a
coyness, a deft, methodic pattern in her steps, in the sway of her hips as she walks away.

Voldemort slides his tongue along his teeth, laughs deep in his throat, a slick rumble of amusement. He’s almost forgotten this kind of power plays, the wily, mercurial vendettas where everything is on the table, where there is as much pain to be given as pleasure, though he doubts pretty little Narcissa ever played them with Lucius. The frown that knits Lucius’ brows after his wife leaves the study reveals as much.

“Tell me, Lucius, have the defences of Azkaban changed?”

Seamlessly, Lucius’ face rearranges itself into something passive, stoically enduring. Voldemort wonders how long he can maintain that mask…if he were to make him watch... A pastime for another time. Lucius has been useful as of late, so subservient and swift to fulfill orders, but he will disturb the waters soon. He can’t help himself, can’t eschew his nature, and when he does...

“No, my Lord. The defences are as they have always been. Azkaban is understaffed and fully reliant on the Dementors. It will be child’s play to infiltrate the prison should you wish it.”

Voldemort scoffs even as he revels in the news. Nothing is changed, of course. There can be no change unless someone seizes the day and drags them kicking and screaming into it. Black will, at least. Others, not so much.

Sirius Black was not a man to bend the knee in his prime, too iron-willed, too reckless, broken just enough as a child to be made unbreakable, but now? After ten years in the Dementors’ care? Azkaban always welcomes its guests, but the welcome is never kind. Black will be too weak to put up more than a feeble struggle. The Imperius Curse might even be enough on its own, and if not… there are other ways. If he can’t take the ring out of the vault, he can take the man to the ring. Goblins don’t care for the mental faculties of their clients as long as they are who they claim to be.

“And what of the ingredients I asked you to procure?”

“I have gathered everything you need.” Lucius stops, then stands taller, his voice lowering, as if what he’ll speak is worthy of praise, self-satisfied as a pet expecting to be rewarded. “I took the liberty of setting up the potions laboratory next to the ritual chamber in the dungeons for your use.”

A self-seeking, obsequious, flamboyant pet. Malfoys…Voldemort has seen three generations of their line, and they’re all slaves to their blood. A family of opportunists, if there’s ever been one. A muster of peacocks. A cowardice of curs.

“Good.” He gives as reward because it is a cheap treat. “I trust there were no complications?”

“None, my Lord. Miss Smith…supposedly had an accident that resulted in her death three days ago. She was mourned and buried with none the wiser.”

Smith…? Lucius’ selection must have been random, but it will be strangely symbolic if the woman is related to Hepzibah. There is power in a name. He chose to use his grandfather’s bones for the ritual to create his body because they share a name and bloodline. Even better if the body is made from the flesh and blood of the woman who gifted him with the vessels for two of his Horcruxes. But no loss if it isn’t. Voldemort spares one glance at the diary on Lucius’ desk, then rises. It is safe inside the Malfoys’ wards, and Lucius knows not to allow anyone to touch it.

“Make certain I will not be disturbed for the next ten days. If an issue arises that demands my attention, resolve it to the best of your judgement. No one is to come into the chamber for any reason. I cannot stress enough how important it is for the ritual to be uncontaminated by external magic.
during the first stage. Is that clear?"

“Perfectly.” Bowing his head, Lucius clears his throat, an uneasy, reluctant shift. “My Lord, if I may inquire about my servant?”

Voldemort arches a brow. What is it with purebloods and their unhealthy obsession with the damned creatures? This one wasn’t even loyal from what he’d observed. Don’t they know the servant is the first to stab a knife in his master’s back? For Salazar’s sake, they’re not muggles. They have magic to take care of their needs. Disgusted, he shakes his head.

“Purchase another house-elf, Lucius.”

“I understand, my Lord.”

Nothingness. Silence. Stasis. Tom had lost perception of time in this void of sempiternal solitude. How long has he spent in this one-dimensional reality, denuded of even the barest of senses? There is no sight here, no sound, no taste, no scent, no touch. It breeds nihilism, decays reason, poisons awareness. What he once thought logical now feels insane, and what he claimed as victory over death seems meaningless.

Victory? He may have laughed at that, but his ears can’t detect a sliver of sound. How did his voice sound? Tom can’t recall, try as he may, and he has tried. Myriad times. Once he had screamed until his throat bled, deluged the hollow space with the agony of his existence. He had clawed at his skin, made his flesh an embodiment of mutilation and red swollen welts. Anesthesia. No matter the method of stimulation, no physical response can be elicited.

There is but one emotion that can still be perceived. Taedium vitae. Boredom, Tom has learned, is the curse of the undying. The irony of his discovery is not lost on him. Has he not damned himself with this limbo thinking it the greatest gift? How foolish he’d once been…wanting to experience this hell for decades to no end. It aggrandizes apathy, morphs it into ennui, binds it with the essence of hatred. Tom has come to loathe all ignorant humans, living their pretty little lives, laughing and smiling and crying, while he is imprisoned in this sufferance. If he’s ever released…if he’s free to walk the earth again…he’ll crush them under his heel, within his stride.

Power has no meaning. Pride has no value. Nothing matters to the damned, nothing but something to fill this void, the emptiness of his existence.

No—I am the heir of Slytherin—I was born to rule! There are times like these, though few and far in between, when Tom regains some measure of his former self, reminisces on his ambitions. A fine line between terrible clarity and lunacy. What a shade he’s degenerated into. His fellow classmates had worshipped him, pledged themselves to his dominion, but would they act the same if they were aware of his folly? Would they treat the remnant as they had the original? No, they wouldn’t, and this knowledge ate at his soul, little by little, scraped the humane parts off his skin, leaving only raw flesh, exposed nerves behind.

Tom Riddle was born to rule. His Horcrux was made to suffer.

Then, a presence. A presence when there should not be one. Magic swelling, hailing, drenching. So much magic, too potent, an onslaught, a cold, torrential downpour. Laughter drums in his lungs, catapults up his throat, until he can contain it no longer. Tom opens his soul and lets it all out, lets all the magic in. It pulses on his tongue, resonates in his blood, floods his chest cavity and forms the muscle of his new heart. Thump thump thump thump—
Suddenly, it stops. Tom feels him then, the holder of the presence, the vessel of the magic, and it dies as it is birthed. In a single pump. Volde—no. His maker picks him up and dusts him off as if Tom is some kind of toy, cracked and thrown away in a childish tantrum, forgotten until there is another use for the discarded fragment. That…that should infuriate him, should—he laughs. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t…he laughs and laughs and keeps laughing. If his maker wants to play with him again, they will play. This time, with new rules.

His maker, too, laughs and strokes the leather spine of his prison. Magic on the pads of his fingers, coldness in his skin, in his black laughter, a petty, ruthless provocation. It is only for the sake of broken pride that Tom even reacts to his touch, and when his maker humors him, another precious piece his price, Tom pretends it is still whole, unbroken. What is pride without impulse? What is power without intent?

It doesn’t end there, of course. Sometimes, the game cannot distinguish between player and victim. Sometimes, it favors the one who has the cruelty to play.

I hate Harry Potter.

Another presence, another magic. Silver wisps, moon slices, spiders weaving their web around the prickly stems of the words. Unfledged magic, unwary of the danger lurking in inconspicuous places. Naivety written on open eyes, open heart. Full of envy, glutted with vitality, malleable as the page in which it gratuitously seeps.

Tom uncurls, stretching outward, tugging at the source of magic with eager hands. He pulls it closer, grips tighter and vies to make it his. His pleasure at seeing, feeling, tasting is tangible, ink spilt like the deadliest secrets, a deal writ in blood and paid with soul.

That is an unconventional first entry. You must have not written in a diary before. How did you come by mine?

Two thick droplets fall messily, pooling over the center of the page before they soak through.

You…can write back?

The letters are strung together, with exaggerated curves and barely legible, the aura of the magic curious, excited. Tentative, but still unwary.

I thought that was evident by now. My name is Tom. Who might you be?

There is a pause, a jittery, insulted silence that implies more than immaturity. Ruffled feathers and petulance. Pureblood, Tom thinks, and laughs. Only the children of pureblood families can be sensitive to this degree. Quick to take offence, but pliant enough to manipulate and bend, until the disdain turns into something else, zealous stares and devotion spreading inside.

Malfy. Draco Malfy.

A Malfy? There was one, yes…blond hair, grey eyes, proud as a peacock and twice as prissy, a first year puppy the year he and Greengrass made Prefect. Strapped to their legs with the rest of his year mates before the end of the first week. Draco emanates a clinging, cloying scent like Abraxas, and Tom already trained one of the Malfoys’ litter.

And what relation to Abraxas Malfy? He used to introduce himself in the same manner.

The reply comes faster now, the veiled slight going over the boy’s head, his initial sullenness
overcome by the need to know more. Carrot and stick.

**You knew grandfather?**

Tom freezes, then hums and rolls his shoulders. He slants his head to the left, slants it to the right, snaps his neck back and laughs until he can’t—

_Fuck me. It is...surreal...to be here with this kid whose grandfather used to clutch at his trousers and beg for Honeydukes’ chocolate every time Tom went to Hogsmeade._

**He has passed away then?**

_No. Grandfather is still alive, just ill. How did you meet him?_

_We went to Hogwarts together. He was my junior by four years. Can you tell me what the date is, Draco?_

_December of 1991._

Fifty years...more than three times the years he got to live...so much and so little.

_Casting his mind in the storm clouds of the Great Hall’s ceiling, flying blind between the flash of lightning and the crack of thunder as the sky sunders all around him. Pitting his will against the scorching hunger of Fiendfyre, half-crazed and under the rush of power, chock-full of dopamine and fire-dancing with chimaeras. Sliding his palms across the scales of Salazar’s basilisk, the smell of bitter venom in his nose and cold, ancient blood. Fucking Greengrass over the sink, with her hair a wet tangle of auburn around the snake-engraved tap, with her body a tight coil of want around his cock._

And he laughs—he laughs _fifty years’_ worth of laughter. This laughter is cold, numbs where it falls, then sizzles until it becomes an ice-burn. Wants move below the threshold of awareness, echoes out of space and time, their mere existence another culmination of a contract half-fulfilled. An inferno rages under his skin, his lungs gushing dark matter, and he is melting, and he is screaming, and _he was not made to live_, and yet—

_Somewhere deep in the blaze, between fragments of now and then and the smoke of burning sage—he comes awake. Tom blinks once, and again, then swallows thickly. His vocal cords feel raw, hallucinations carved inside his throat, and he wants...he wants to live again._
Lethe

Diary, 25th August, 1978

It’s been two months since uncle Charlus gave James Ignotus’ journal. And James is still sulking. I mean, I understand it must be a huge letdown to learn that his illustrious ancestors were arseholes having a prick measuring contest, but this has gone on long enough. So what if his fabled heirloom is basically a woman’s robe? A tennyo’s hagoromo might not be so rare since there are a couple dozen left in Japan, but it’s still something priceless.

He’s got nothing to whine about, really. The Peverells were brilliant before that whole Hallows fiasco blew up in their face. Professor Flitwick says there’s nothing wrong with them being necromancers, and after reading that journal I agree with him. It’s about understanding life and death, not making zombies. James can be so judgmental. If my ancestors were the leading experts on death magic, I’d be proud of my heritage and want to continue their legacy.

They did craft the Elder Wand, and it was still amazing even if it was the only thing the Peverells actually made. Who cares if the other two so-called Hallows were items Cadmus and Ignotus found after they embarked on a journey to foreign lands? Yes, Antioch got greedy and backstabbed his brothers and took the wand for his own. Yes, Cadmus and Ignotus couldn’t make something as great with only the two of them, probably because they lacked whatever Antioch brought to the table. Maybe it was the power of three that enabled the creation of the wand? Hm, food for thought.

Bottom line is they did make the Elder Wand. I just wish Ignotus had written down exactly how they made it. But then Antioch went and declared himself a dark lord, and I think Ignotus blamed the wand in part. I’d still love to study it. And James is still ranting about that, as if Antioch was the only dark lord in his family tree when I’ve counted three so far. Distant relations, my left foot. He should just be glad Antioch got stopped by the other two and it’s not common knowledge these days. Ignotus was a genius, asking for his brother’s memory to be preserved as just an arsehole and not a murdering arsehole for the sake of their family name after they defeated him. James should be satisfied with that and look at the positive side of things.

Although, I wonder who had the brilliant idea of throwing bits and pieces of the muggle Revelation in there. The last enemy to be destroyed is death… and all that biblical shite. This is why you shouldn’t mix up religion with magic. Master of Death, my arse. Professor Flitwick was right. The arrogance of wizards knows no bounds. Even if everyone agreed to keep mum about it, these things have a tendency to be blown way out of proportion with all the lies they made up to hide the truth.

And as for the truth, I keep wondering… Where is the ancient archway that started it all? The Peverells were so taken with it, they even took its symbol as their family crest. Ignotus wrote they would have never been able to craft the wand without the understanding they gained by studying that archway. Its symbol looks an awful lot like Grindelwald’s too. Coincidence? I think not. If only James could get his head out of his arse and search for the Elder Wand. That’s the true Peverell heirloom, after all.

Harry closes his mother’s journal and places it on top of the nightstand. The last enemy to be destroyed is death… that line, like an itch in his brain he can’t help but scratch. If it is a biblical reference… Bitterly, he thanks Petunia for all those wasted, endless hours he spent reading the New Testament under her gimlet eye.

Drowning a sigh, he rises from the bed and walks to the bookcase, scanning titles until he finds the old-worn copy he should have thrown away but hadn’t. Somehow, Harry couldn’t bring himself to
be rid of a book, even one as casuistic as the Bible. Perhaps because in spite of context, there is an archaic, absolute symmetry to the words and concepts explored within. Ah, yes…there it is: 1 Corinthians 15:26.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 24Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. 28When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

The Peverells fancied themselves conquerors of death then. Or perhaps that is the popular interpretation nowadays. Apropos to a family of necromancers, even if only a few are aware of their esoteric areas of study. Professor Flitwick certainly, but what about the headmaster? Why did his father entrust the Peverell heirloom to that man? Knowing what he knows about his father now… A prank? If the headmaster falls in the category of people searching for the mystical artifacts said to overcome death, then it is quite possible. Cruel, but who cares? The old man is too nosy for his own good, prying into old family secrets and scheming to control the life of the last Potter.

His mouth curls, a slow, crooked fox-smile. Harry hums and eyes the Bible speculatively. Well, he did promise to reciprocate the headmaster's kind gesture, and now that he suspects the old man's hidden interests… What better gift than an insight into the Peverell family motto?

His father would approve. Pranking runs in the blood, after all.

The cemetery in Godric’s Hollow is eerie but quaint, a throng of cool, marmoreal headstones and silence. The air dizzies with the smell of incense and floral odors—damp soil sticks to the soles of his shoes. Everything seems to move with somnolent rhythms, as if there is no time to pass, no need to breathe. The chirping of birds is mere white noise in Harry’s ears, the morning chill sharp and prickling at the nape of his neck. He raises a hand absentmindedly—the pads of his fingers brush the soft locks tickling his skin above the fur-lined collar of his jacket. It is a strange sensation but not unpleasant, a light, insistent press, the wind at his back urging him forward with invisible hands. A cold, dead welcome.

Slowly, the noise fades, but the chill is still sharp, burrowing under his skin and in his blood. Harry slows his steps once he reaches the place he seeks. Mist clings to the ground, swirling around his ankles in hazy patterns. The spot where his parents have been laid to rest is empty save for one lone passerby. His eyes flit over the woman’s hunched frame, then dismiss her when he notes no suspicious behavior.

The surface of the gravestone shimmers bluish white under the morning light, a simple, square cut of stone, scoured smooth, with calligraphic letters etched into the marble. A smile creeps over his lips when he sees the Peverell motto under their names. He still has no words to say. There are no souls beneath the earth, only truth and bones, the hard, physical proof of the way things are meant to be. As Ignotus Peverell spoke on his deathbed: It is I who come unto death, for what begins must end, yet death comes for nothing.

Coming here was pointless, not a mistake, never a mistake, just…unnecessarily necessary. Something that had to be done, if only for the mere sake of it. Harry exhales a heavy breath, a regret
he didn’t know he harbored until now—

“Bless my heart, is that—it is you! Those eyes, yes…Lily’s sweet boy… Oh, how much you’ve grown.”

Startled, Harry jerks back, angling his body to better defend himself, magic rushing to his fingertips. The old woman he earlier dismissed stands close, though not close enough to feel threatening. She’s frail, shivering, wrapped up in woolen shawls, two small bouquets of daisies and lilies in her arms. Her eyes are almost the same color as the gravestone, but murky, dim with cataracts.

She seems harmless, probably an old neighbor of his parents. Tension uncoils in his muscles, magic flowing back into his system. Harry sighs, then smiles at her. “You knew my parents, madam?”

“Oh, none of that, young man. You may not remember old Bathilda Bagshot, but you will call me aunt Tilda. I’ve changed your nappies more than once.” The old woman’s hands are bony and ridged with calluses but warm when they grasp Harry’s for a quick squeeze. Her bouquets sway precariously, spilling out of her arms. He hurries to catch them before they fall in the mud, and she pats his cheek. “Be a nice lad and help me with your mum’s and little Ariana’s flowers. We’ll have tea and you’ll tell me where you’ve been then.”

Nodding, Harry kneels and arranges the lilies below the inscription. The name she gives…niggles at the back of his mind. He’s sure he has heard it before, somewhere. Maybe he’s read it in his mother’s journal? When he straightens up, she’s watching him with blurry eyes and a soft, sad smile. “Thank you for remembering my parents.”

“I’m not the only one.” Madam Bagshot starts walking with gimping steps as she speaks. Harry offers her his arm before she can go too far, chuckling when he feels her patting his elbow. At least this time it isn’t his cheek. “Lily’s wee master and the Scottish lassie who used to show with James come every year, and sometimes that scruffy werewolf boy.” A frown pulls at the folded skin above her brows, and she tsk’s under her tongue. “Don’t let that scare you. A kinder boy than him you won’t find.”

Harry is tempted to tell her she’s right only because he won’t go looking for someone who couldn’t be bothered with him, but holds his tongue. They pass by many gravestones on their way, Ignotus Peverell’s among them. Harry notices the runic carvings around the edges and the absence of the Peverell family motto. Who had the grand idea of adding it to his parents’ headstones? Certainly no Potter—they all knew the truth, and should they wish to honor their ancestors, they’d have chosen Ignotus’ last words. Not that there was any Potter left alive by then. But the runes…Elder Futhark…he needs to study—

Madam Bagshot comes to a halt, and Harry’s gaze widens. The girl’s surname… “Dumbledore?”

“Abe’s and Albus’ sister, bless her soul. Didn’t deserve what happened to her.” Grief quivers in her voice, old and deep, the milky white of her eyes glazed. “Those muggle boys ruined the girl’s magic. She never was right after that.”

Harry places the daisies on the gravestone, quietly mulling over her words. Taking advantage of an old lady to gather intelligence on the headmaster stabs at his conscience. But when will an opportunity like this come again? Madam Bagshot seems like a lonely old woman, forgotten in a village built by ghosts that never left. She’s too happy to meet the son of people who died over ten years ago, too eager to treat him as the baby she once doted on. Does anyone ever visit her? Does anyone even care about her like she does for the dead?

He shakes his head and links their arms as they begin walking again. He’ll let her lead, Harry
decides, both the way and the conversation. If she wants to share things, he will listen, but he won’t manipulate her for answers. Just ask. “Were they punished?”

“Oh, no. The girl’s father attacked them, spent his life in Azkaban for what he did and never spoke a word of it. They moved here to hide the girl’s state, but you can’t hide these things for long. Damaged magic will show in a child. Gellert even thought she was an Obscurial when he met the girl.”

The term is unfamiliar, but the name—she can’t possibly mean... “Gellert Grindelwald?”

Even as she nods, Harry still hovers between doubt and incredulity. He thought she’d deny it up until the moment she opens her mouth and shatters his disbelief.

“Aye, my great-nephew.” A tremor enters her voice, brittle as her grip on his arm. “He came to live with me when he was expelled from Durmstrang, met Albus that summer and they became thick as thieves. Clever boys, they were, wanted to rule the world together. Poor Abe didn’t like it, didn’t want Ariana getting swept up in their plans. They had a big row, all three of them. Spells were thrown around, and well...the lassie didn’t make it. Nobody could tell whose spell did it, but Abe never forgave Albus. He left and never came back home, and Albus broke it off with Gellert.”

Harry keeps his gaze straight ahead while she gets it all off her chest. The Potter Cottage stands out like a parody of a haunted house, half the roof blown away, bricks charred, plastered with thanks, accolades, platitudes, warnings, threats. Property of the ministry now, sold for the cheap price of two pure souls and the sullied slice of another. Revolted, Harry turns his gaze away and follows the old woman into her home. She takes his hand in hers, guides him into the living room and toward the wall laden with framed photographs. Two boys pose in one, blue-eyed, bright-haired, no older than seventeen.

“It’s old history now, but I remember. Bringing flowers to little Ariana is the least I can do for...for what my...my boy...did.” She stares at the golden-haired boy in the picture, choking up, words mangled and wet like her tears, a low, guilty admission. Patting the back of his hand, she draws away from the wall and limps to the couch. “Eh, enough about that. Come, sit. Tell me where you’ve been, dear boy. I haven’t seen you since your parents passed away.”

There’s a rose-patterned tea set on the table, and bowls with tea leaves, lemon slices, ginger biscuits, water, milk, and honey. Harry guesses it must be easier for someone her age to have everything under stasis charms nearby. Smiling, he takes over the task of making the tea, in part because he wants time to digest what he’s learned.

“I grew up with mum’s sister in the muggle world. I could only visit this year.”

Despite his casual tone, inside he’s thinking furiously, shuffling the cards he’s been dealt until he gets a winning hand. It all makes sense—the headmaster’s quest for redemption, the way he runs Hogwarts, how he shapes the political landscape. Fear drives him, and the need to believe all is redeemable. Because if it isn’t...he can’t live with himself and the cost of his adolescent choices. What an irony...by striving to erase the ambitions of his younger self, he has placed himself in the best position to achieve them.

What can Harry do with this knowledge...besides put it in a little black book? Because it is the perfect blackmail material, and he’s always been more proactive than reactive. Rita Skeeter would sell her firstborn for this kind of provocative scoop. Even if Harry refuses to reveal his source, that vulture won’t care for veracity, only for the chance to drag the headmaster through the mud. Neither will her readers, for that matter. The real issue is...Harry doesn’t want to become involved. He doesn’t care for politics. He cares for magic. He wants out.
In the midst of his inner conflict between hamstringing the headmaster and keeping a wary silence, Harry realizes Madam Bagshot has been quiet for too long. He carries their cups to the couch, his mouth curving just a little, and that appears to be the sign she’s been waiting for.

“The muggles…didn’t hurt you, did they?” A whisper, raspy…concerned.

It brings a tight, warm feeling low in his belly. “No…aunt Tilda.” His reply is more for her sake than his, a genuine, pure thing like his smile, even if it is a lie.

“Good, that’s good.” She smiles back, sipping at her tea, and Harry lets his gaze wander.

What holds his attention is the bookcase. It spreads across one wall, from floor to ceiling, shelves crammed with thick tomes and—it hits him then. Bathilda Bagshot, the author of *A History of Magic*. He whips round to stare at her, pupils blown wide, and she erupts in a fit of coughing laughter.

“Figured it out, have you? Just like Lily.” Her laughter ebbs into dry, heaving sounds. “Not many your age have read my book. Mind you, I wrote others, just not as well received.”

Thrilled, Harry grins. “I’m very interested in magical history, but the class leaves something to be desired.” Both comments are understatement.

“Keh, I know.” She half-coughs, half-laughs again. It sounds painful, but alive. Harry reckons she hasn’t laughed in a long, long time. “Who ever heard of a ghost teaching? The dead should stay dead, I say.” Massaging her throat, she stands with some effort and hobbles to the bookcase. “Come here and take a look, take whatever you like. You can bring them back when the school closes.”

“I couldn’t—”

“You won’t break an old woman’s heart, will you?”

Harry snickers. “You did change my nappies.”

“That I did.” Her pale blue eyes gleam wetly. She’s patting his cheek again, but Harry doesn’t mind this time. “Go on now. Pick what you like.”

“Thank you, aunt Tilda.”

In the end, he’s chosen so many books, or more like chosen for him—I insist, dear boy, take one more, and this one, and that one, and and and—she has to shrink them to fit into the pockets of his jacket. Before Harry leaves, she slips one last into his hands. Unshrunk, unlike the rest, her fingers lingering, caressing the black leather of its cover.

“My Gellert was a lot of things I wish he weren’t, but that boy was a marvel to see with a wand. If you want to know how to duel, this’ll show you the proper way, not the fancy stick-waving they teach at Hogwarts nowadays. You don’t have to return this one, if you promise to take good care of it.”

Harry opens it and reads *Property of Gellert Grindelwald* inked on the first page and knows how priceless her gift is.

“I promise, aunt Tilda.” He leaves with his promise throbbing in the flesh of his tongue and the skin on his cheek tingling from the warmth of her hand.

Tom rubs the bridge of his nose and sighs. Seven conversations with Draco have yielded a wealth of
information, but the boy is such a handful.

Are you sure I have to do this?

Yes, Draco. Remember, we talked about this. Nothing in this world is free. If you want power, you have to make sacrifices. You do want to outshine Potter, don’t you?

No reply follows, nothing but a surly silence as Draco carries on with his appointed task. It would have been so much easier if he could take full control of Draco’s body. Unfortunately, Tom needs him—needs him alive and healthy. A conclusion that still rankles. But Draco makes an invaluable pawn in this game and bears the promise of a loyal follower. Lucius Malfoy is an incompetent sycophant, as far as Tom has gleaned from Draco’s ramblings, and yet his maker continues to depend on him. His son will be the perfect little spy, above suspicion due to his age and ignorance.

I drew the runes. Now what, Tom?

Cede control to me, Draco. It will only be for a few minutes, and I promise you will feel the effects as soon as the ritual is done.

And it is not even a lie. The residual magic from the ritual should bolster Draco’s system for several months. Should, not will, because the ritual itself is theoretical in its concept. After fifty years trapped in this void, Tom is aware of what he can and cannot do. He can never gain form without leeching another—their magic, their life, their soul—but changing vessels should be possible by tweaking the original ritual and harvesting the raw magic released from a sacrifice.

Why can’t I do this on my own?

Because you don’t know how to manipulate magic, and even if I were to start teaching you now, it would take you years to become proficient for this kind of ritual.

Again, not a lie, not that Draco appreciates the depths of Tom’s patience. Another silence, stubborn, petulant.

Have I ever lied to you, Draco? Did I not help you with your studies? Did I not promise to keep helping you?

Finally, a thrum of acceptance, and then, I give you permission.

Tom doesn’t waste another moment—it feels incredible to have flesh and blood and bones, but that is a goal further ahead in the future. What he needs now is freedom of action.

One slow, deep cut. The peacock’s blood spills from its torn throat and over Gebo, and the rune lights up. Tom directs the magic into the lines that form the runic matrix until Raidō glows an incandescent blood-red. It hooks onto his soul and pulls him out, pulls him in. Right as the ritual is reaching completion, Tom severs a small part of himself, no larger than his little finger, ruthlessly discarded as his maker once discarded him. A deception, the opening act of his vengeance, intoxicating as it is agonizing.

Slowly, he feels the drain. Tom stretches out in his new vessel, testing the boundaries, pleased with his success.

Tom? Are you here? Did it work? Because that felt amazing!

A subtle brush against the boy’s magic confirms Tom’s hypothesis. Draco did benefit from the ritual.
Yes, Draco. Do you trust me now?

You were right! I’ll never doubt you again.

Good. Now clean up the mess and put my old diary back where you found it before your father realizes it’s missing.

Spent, satisfied, Tom laughs and curls up. This is only the beginning.

Voldemort comes out of the ritual chamber to find Lucius not ten feet away. He slips a hand over his face and presses the backs of his fingers against his eyelids and he—he can’t feel his skin. Quirinus’ body is breaking down fast. There’s no more time to play the old fool’s game. If the Philosopher’s Stone hasn’t turned up by mid-February… Not that he has absolute need of it anymore. It is more a matter of pride now.

“I have left instructions for you, Lucius. The second stage of the ritual is simple enough that even a first year student could do it.”

Lucius bows and follows behind him silently as he ascends the stairs to the man’s study. His diary is where he left it. Voldemort reaches out with a tendril of magic. It feels weaker, fainter, but the signature of his soul saturates the pages. Perhaps because he is no longer feeding it?

A light shuffle draws his attention back to Lucius.

“Should I contact you when it is done, my Lord?”

Why is he surrounded by imbeciles? He sighs, closes his eyes, and opens them again. Lucius is still staring at him with well-masked confusion. Voldemort pours himself a drink he can’t even taste and all but growls.

“The gestation lasts exactly forty days. All you have to do is feed it, Lucius. If you find yourself incapable of such a simple task, you can assign it to Narcissa. There is no need to contact me—unless you somehow mess it all up. Don’t. Mess. Up.”

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