Turning of the Times

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Summary

After looking into Snape's pensieve, Harry makes up his mind to take charge of his actions—but before he can, he is sent back in time to 1975. He must find his own way back to the future without upsetting the time line, but the Dark Lord is on the rise, and Harry's never been good at keeping his head down.

Canon Divergent after "Snape's Worst Memory" in OotP.

Notes

Hello! Welcome to Turning of the Times, the first part of a long-form Harry Potter fanfiction. If you’re not interested in reading the author’s notes, by all means scroll on down past this, however I suggest you read the ‘Canon Compliance’ bit first.

As the title suggests, this first installment falls into the category of time travel fic, which I’ve had outlined since last summer and been actively writing since last October. This is predominantly a plotty fic, not a ship fic, and plot does it have. In it’s current, mostly unedited state, T0tT is currently drafted with 230k out of an estimated 350k written (and a steady daily writing/editing schedule keeping it moving). Most chapters are 8-12k (this one on the longer
end) and it is looking to wrap up in about thirty-three chapters. As of right now, I’m going to aim to upload chapters once every two weeks, though this may slow down as editing and writing do take time. So buckle in for a wild ride, folks, ‘cause it’s going to be a long one.

That being said, a few things to declare right off the bat, because I know if I don’t I will end up having comments about it later.

First: Though this is not a ship fic, it does feature characters with romantic entanglements. They are less a point than in canon, but they are there. Several characters also identify as queer, even characters that you might not interpret as such in the canon. Luckily for me, I am a fanfiction writer, not JKR, and I do not have to obey the established canon if I don’t want to. Although I do not intend to write anything that disagrees with the canon, my interpretation probably differs from yours. These will be rather minor points in the story, and should make sense within context, but you have been warned.

Second: this fic eventually contains Death Eaters and Death Eater related violence, sometimes graphic violence, which may include characters you like being tortured and characters you like being forced to act in ways they would not on their own. I will label these chapters with appropriate warnings as best I can. If you would like me to label for any specific warnings, let me know. (Edit: Some (but not all) additional CWs include: discussion of suicide, discussion of unhealthy eating habits, discussion of domestic violence, child abuse, fantasy racism, discussion of systematic oppression, sometimes all-too-relevant political situations, graphic on-screen torture, abuse that is literally impossible to speak about, discussions of homophobia, destruction of safe spaces, characters with trauma/their own specific triggers/who develop new trauma and triggers, sensory overstimulation, disassociation, on-screen character death, animal death, children being trained to participate in many of the previous behaviors, coercion of main characters into participating in many of the previous listed behaviors, discussion of unhealthy relationships between adults and minors ... and more, that I will try to come back and list here.)

Canon Compliance:

There are a few changes to the canon that are important to note here, mostly in terms of when events happen (which, as you might imagine, is rather important for a time travel fic). First, the calendar of April 1996 is a bit confusing in the books to begin with and I’ve just messed with it more, so I’ve gone and laid it out here. The most important thing to note is that Harry tries to contact Sirius the Friday after ‘Snape’s Worst Memory’, as opposed to in the books, in which he stews for 2-3 weeks beforehand. The second most important thing is to note that to achieve this, the Easter Holiday begins on Saturday the 17th and lasts for one week. I’ve set the dates as follows:

Monday, April 12: Last DA meeting - Dumbledore leaves Hogwarts
Tuesday, April 13: Fred & George release fireworks
Wednesday, April 14: Harry looks in the pensieve
Thursday, April 15: This story begins
Friday, April 16: Harry tries to contact Sirius

I’ve also created a functioning schedule, for my sanity, which doesn’t necessarily line up with the canon. Beyond that, there should only be little inconsistencies here or there (i.e. I’ve inserted the Notes into the story, as you will see); that being said I am only human and good ol’ JKR is notoriously difficult to pin down on specifics like dates and times and numbers of students at Hogwarts at a given time. If you spot anything, you are welcome to let me know, although I probably won’t change it unless it is of major impact.

Last point: I take canon as somewhere between the books for anything plot and the movies for a large portion of the visual scenery. For example, Dumbledore’s office does not completely line up with how it is described in the book. I’m sure no one minds, but if it bothers you, remember that Hogwarts is a constantly changing piece of magical architecture.
It was midday, and most of the students at Hogwarts were at lunch or loitering in the halls, much more eager in the pursuit of entertainment than education. Generally, of course, they were being kept very busy. The professors at Hogwarts knew well that busyness was serious business. A bored student was a student who found trouble; a student whose schedule was packed with erratic class times, energy-consuming extracurriculars, and, of course, a generous dose of homework was a student with no time to be bored, and thus no need to misbehave. It was not a perfect system, but it kept incidents to a manageable minimum, and by the end of their first year, the students that needed extra attentive distraction made themselves clear.

Some, such as the unfortunate and newly declared Headmistress, Mme. Dolores Umbridge, thought rules were the solution. A pathetic sort of idealism, if one cared to be generous. She clearly had little experience in managing swarms of children armed with magic and imaginations when she began issuing her seventy-nine educational decrees.

Rules, as any long-term professor could tell you, were best kept to short and certain numbers. For example, the three cardinal rules of daily life at Hogwarts:

1. Don’t go out of bounds or out of hours, unless with a professor.
2. Don’t use spells on others, unless told by a professor.
3. Don’t mess with magic you don’t understand, unless guided by a professor.

Short, to the point, and broad enough to cover just about any situation. When they did not, there was always the grand list, as found in Appendix C of *Hogwarts, a History*. Of course, among the professors there were also a handful of rules that went unspoken. Chief among those? Don’t tell students where to find the list of rules. Where there were rules there were loopholes, and in a school like Hogwarts, there were always students who would find ways to exploit them.

Professor Umbridge, in her pointedly brief tenure at Hogwarts, had taken to announcing her decrees (a glorified title for making legal matters out of pet peeves) at dinner and posting them outside the Great Hall, where they were slowly but surely wallpapering the stone around the notice board. Unfortunately for the Professor, her life of self-imposed estrangement from the muggle world seemed to have deprived her of some of its basic adages, such as *Rules are made to be broken* and *Where there’s a will, there’s a way*.

Fred and George Weasley, two students to whom half of Umbridge’s decrees had been dedicated, observed them with crossed arms. The pair was tucked away in a window nook across the landing, not hidden but overlooked, as was their talent to be. Somewhere between decree number twenty-four—*ALL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS, SOCIETIES, TEAMS, GROUPS, AND CLUBS ARE HENCEFORTH DISBANDED*—and twenty-eight—*DOLORES JANE UMBRIDGE (HIGH INQUISITOR) HAS REPLACED ALBUS DUMBLEDORE AS THE HEAD OF HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY*—their prankster’s pride had given way to spite. Every additional paper that had gone up in the three days since Umbridge's promotion had made them a bit angrier.

“You know what I’m thinking, George?” Fred asked.
George had an inkling. “Never tickle a sleeping dragon?”

“But is she the dragon, or are we?”

“Point.”

“Hypothesis?”

“McGonagall.”

They chuckled and shook hands, as though making some sort of bet between themselves. Perhaps they were. With the Weasley twins, one could never be sure.

It was clear to anyone who knew anything of Fred and George—the whole school, that is—that Umbridge’s strategy was doomed to fail from the start. Perhaps that was why Dumbledore had not put an end to it before absconding Hogwarts. He was, after all, notorious for allowing fires to burn themselves out. In the previous five years, Dumbledore had declared but one major rule, and that had been bait more than anything else. Umbridge, on the other hand, had alongside her Decrees set Filch digging through his records for old regulations to reinstate, making contraband out of colorful hair accessories and turning skipping in the halls an offense punishable by three nights’ detention.

Then again, unlike Umbridge Dumbledore’s mind had been elsewhere, and it seemed to many of those who bothered with speculation that his expulsion from the grounds had actually been more convenient to the wizard than not. It was hardly responsible to go running off on some adventure, leaving behind his school-full of part-time wards in the hands of a truly abysmal babysitter, but he hadn’t exactly been keeping a close eye on them while physically present on the campus, either.

One of those wards, feeling very neglected and confused indeed, was Harry Potter.

Like the Weasley twins, Harry one of those students who often found trouble—though perhaps it would be kinder to say that trouble had a way of finding him—and so he couldn’t help having the whole school keeping tabs on him. Before he could even remember he had made the mistake of defeating the Dark Lord, an act which had imprisoned him permanently in the bedtime stories of magical children across Europe. Bolstering his unwanted legendary status, keeping tabs on the Harry Potter was quite simply a favorite pastime of the students and staff alike, as his life was decisively more exciting than most. There were several illicit betting pools running as to how soon the fateful boy would next face death, land himself in the hospital wing, prove the impossible possible, usher in the apocalypse, or at least earn another detention.

As such, it would surprise approximately no one that Harry was spending his lunch hour alone, in Gryffindor Tower, brooding. He’d become an accomplished sulk in the past year. Not that it was undeserved—most teenagers could sulk even in a true utopia, and Harry’s life was closer to ‘living hell’ than utopia. The student body, for the most part, understood that; they all had at least some sense that whatever had happened on the night of the final task of the Triwizard Tournament (a disastrous and of course Ministry-sponsored event the year before) Harry and the other Hogwarts champion had disappeared, and only Harry had made it back alive. If he hadn’t spent at least some portion of his time haunted by gloom, they’d have thought he wasn’t right in the head.

More so than they already did, that was. The papers claimed he was criminally insane, and now that he’d been reportedly caught leading Dumbledore’s secret student rebel army—well. Nine and a third out of ten students would have guessed he was brooding any time they were asked, with various degrees of snickering involved.

On that particular Thursday afternoon, however, Harry wasn’t worrying about the missing
Headmaster or trying to forget the weight of Cedric’s lifeless body when he’d brought it home. No, currently he was stuck on something none of his peers could have guessed. Only one man knew anything of Harry’s current misery, and he, as a rule, would prefer Harry’s agony amplified.

It had all started the night before, when Snape had been called out during their usual occlumency ‘lesson’. These weekly encounters, which could accurately be compared to two rhinoceros charging into a solid brick wall for hours on end, were the only connection Harry had to anything related to the war, and yet they failed to shed any light on what was happening outside the castle and so entirely useless to him. When Snape left the room, Harry, in one of his brilliantly shortsighted moments, had chanced a look in the pensieve Snape used to store memories during their lessons. Why the professor used it, Harry had never thought to ask. What he had hoped to find—it hardly mattered: what he had found was a memory, and solid proof that every nasty thing Snape had said about his father for the past five years was at least somewhat true.

Harry didn’t want to believe what he’d seen. His father, James Potter, publically humiliating the disagreeable Professor back when the both of them had been Harry’s age? It struck almost too close to home. Snape had been defenseless, and James had jinxed him to hang upside-down in front of their classmates, robes leaving his bare legs and pants on display. And for what? Snape had been there, and the marauders had been bored.

Harry sighed and rolled onto his back. He’d already tried to convince himself that it had been some sort of trick, but couldn’t bring himself to really believe that. Snape had been mortified that he’d seen the memory—livid. And he had every right to be. Loath as Harry was to admit he had something in common with his potions professor, if it had been him, he wouldn’t have wanted anyone to know about that, either. Least of all a student. Least of all the son of his tormentor.

The scars on Harry’s ankle from where Aunt Marge’s dog had bitten him, the one on his arm from when Dudley had wanted to know what would happen if he slammed his cousin’s arm in the door—Harry didn’t exactly go around showing them off. If the memory was real, Snape had every right to keep that private, which made Harry seeing it even worse.

If it was real.

Harry wanted desperately to get in contact with his godfather, Sirius. Sirius, who had been in the memory, who had been bored and said as much to James, prompting the whole incident. Sirius, who was one of the only adults who ever told Harry the truth about anything, who could probably put the memory out of his mind, if only he could contact him. He couldn’t. Of course he couldn’t. He wanted to contact Sirius, who was Sirius Black, who had a ministry bounty on his head and a penchant for risky behavior. Even if there was a floo he could use—Umbridge had all the fireplaces on lockdown after Harry’s last floo conversation—the Headmistress had an uncanny ability for showing up where she was least wanted.

Besides, the last thing Harry needed was for the ministry to find out he’d been in contact with a known fugitive. They were probably already debating having him formally tried for assisting Dumbledore. Not that he had. Dumbledore would have had to tell Harry what he was up to, for Harry assist.

That was it, though, wasn’t it? He couldn’t get in contact with Sirius, Dumbledore had run off and left Harry isolated at the castle, and Snape wasn’t exactly a font of information regarding the war—the war that Umbridge was hell-bent on convincing them didn’t exist. The Order of the Phoenix was up to something trying to fight Voldemort, but no one would tell Harry what.

He’d thought the pensive might have something—anything—that he could use. As for what he had expected to do with whatever information he gathered? Well, he hadn’t exactly had a plan. But he
had thought he could do something.

Maybe he was as arrogant as Snape always said, not keeping his head down until Dumbledore returned.

Just like your father. Oh, that had so much more meaning to it now.

Now, left alone in the dark and distraught, Harry wanted to speak to Sirius more than ever. But every time he so much as considered it, he could hear Hermione’s obvious rebuttal ringing in his ears: It’s too dangerous, Harry! If Sirius is caught, he’ll surely get the kiss! He couldn’t even write a letter, because Umbridge was reading their mail, too.

Instead, Harry was left imagining how the conversation would go. Hi, Sirius; how are you; it’s been a few months; hey, I heard you and my Dad used to find it funny to hang kids by their ankles in front of the whole school, that true? Yes, he hoped that Sirius would be able to settle Harry’s mind, but he couldn’t imagine how. And even if Sirius could offer him irrefutable evidence that the whole thing had been some twisted plot of Snape’s, Harry would never be able to get the image of James Potter, bully, out of his mind.

Outside, the castle bells tolled, and Harry reluctantly rolled off his bed. He had Defense Against the Dark Arts to get to. Defense would have been his favorite subject—it had been the previous two years, when Hogwarts had mostly competent teachers—but now the class wasn’t worth attending, for even though she had been elevated to Headmistress Umbridge hadn’t deserted the role of Defense professor that she’d originally stepped in to fill. Merlin knows where she found the time; most Professors barely had a spare moment to get to grading, let alone dabbling in Headmastery. Somehow she managed to be an even worse Professor than she was Headmistress (she wouldn’t even let them use magic!) and Harry, outspoken as he could be, seldom made it through class without earning a detention.

Still, on this particular day Harry hoped she would provide the distraction he sorely needed. Unfortunately, going to class would involve meeting up with Ron and Hermione. He was avoiding them. That in and of itself wasn’t unusual for the sulking fifth year, but he was at it whole-heartedly that day, knowing that if he explained what he’d seen in the pensieve they’d both have questions he wouldn’t know how to answer. He’d hidden in Gryffindor Tower during lunch, claiming a headache. It had quickly proven a troublesome excuse; Hermione had started babbling on about practicing his occlumency or maybe going to see Professor Snape, even after he’d promised her it was just a result of not getting enough sleep. Ron had probably assumed he just wanted to take advantage of the empty dorm. There were five fifteen-year-old boys sharing their room in the tower, and some things went best unspoken.

Though he dawdled as long as he could without risking being late, sure enough when he reached the bottom of the stairs Hermione was there waiting for him. She was out of breath. “Harry! Professor Umbridge is doing bag checks!”

Harry’s hand jumped protectively to his bag, but he knew he didn’t have any of Fred and George’s joke products with him, and his invisibility cloak was up in his trunk. “Okay,” he said with a shrug. “I don’t have anything—”

“The D.A. Notes!”

Harry spun on tail, rushing up the stairs. If Umbridge found those, Harry would have no defense.

The Notes had been Hermione’s idea. Hermione had wanted Harry to take running Dumbledore’s Army (as their defense study group had oh so brilliantly called themselves), so she had advised
Harry to write a list of everything they had studied and everything they had talked about studying in the future. With Hermione annotating it with references to their old, actually useful textbooks and Harry jotting down whatever he thought specific members would need to keep in mind, the notes doubled as a self-guided lesson plan, which they gave copies of to anyone who missed a meeting. Harry had been filling them out in his notebook for Defense, seeing as Umbridge’s mind-numbing lectures were practically his only free time between preparations for the upcoming OWL exams, occlumency lessons, and his near-constant detentions with Umbridge.

When Umbridge finally caught them only a few nights ago, Dumbledore had taken the blame and fled from the castle. The D.A. was disbanded; the Room of Requirements insecure. They couldn’t gather as a club anymore. Harry was sure he was going to have another month of detentions if Umbridge found the notes—if he wasn’t just expelled.

As he leaped up the stairs and back into the dormitory, Harry tugged the offending notebook from his bag. It wouldn’t be the best solution, but he figured if he just switched it out another…

Harry’s trunk proved to be in as much disarray as ever. He grabbed the invisibility cloak off the top and shoved it under his rumpled quilt, but everything else he tossed aside: books, tests and homework assignments marked in red ink, old clothes, his unused quidditch robes, sweaters from Mrs. Weasley, mismatched socks from Dobby, the charmed pocketknife Sirius had given him for Christmas. The Sneakoscope Ron had sent Harry from Egypt fell out of an old sock and started shrieked on the floor, only to be smothered by the whale-sized trousers Dudley had discarded that summer. Finally, beneath a handful of unread mail from the end of the Triwizard Tournament, Harry found his Defense notebook from the year before, filled with his nearly illegible handwriting. Shoving it into his bag, Harry ran back down the steps to the common room.

Hermione was waiting with the Fat Lady’s portrait propped open, craning her neck to peer up the stairs, when Harry came running down. They sprinted to the Defense classroom, slowing to a walk as they rounded the last corner and reaching the end of the queue just before the bell rang. Umbridge and Filch were checking each bag and had already confiscated what looked like several of Fred’s and George’s prank supplies, as well as a quill that was probably charmed to cheat or take notes and a copy of the Quibbler. When Harry stepped up, Filch snatched his bag and gleefully upturned it, dumping everything inside onto the table they’d set up. The caretaker barely caught a bottle of ink before it fell to the floor, and Harry’s good quill bent to a sharp angle as it was caught under his textbook.

Behind him, Harry could hear Hermione gasp, but he met and held eye contact with Umbridge until her smirk started to slip. Filch, it seemed, was disappointed in what his dramatic gesture had revealed, for he was checking the pockets of Harry’s bag, prodding a grubby finger into each one. At last Umbridge tore her eyes away from Harry’s and gave in to her obvious desire to rifle through his things.

She seemed to have a better sense of what she was looking for than Filch, at least, as she snatched Harry’s notebook and flipped through the pages, her tight smile growing thinner the further she got. When she reached the end of what Harry had used—‘Moody’ had been a practical teacher, so it was only about half-full—she stared down at his notes, her nostrils flared out, and brought her eyes back up in a beady glare.

“Mr. Potter,” she said in that grating, high-pitched voice. Harry had only been faking a headache before, but he hoped it was not a lecture day, as listening to her cloying tones would give him one in earnest, and nausea besides. “Where is your homework?”

Harry waited just long enough for the corners of her mouth to curl up again. “Marking the chapter in
my book,” he said with false lightness. “Say, do you have a quill I could borrow? It seems mine is broken, and it would be so disappointing not to be able to take notes. You know, ‘cause they help the materials really set in, and all.”

Her eyes widened slightly, and Harry could see how she struggled not to glance down at his hand, where the hours of detention writing lines with her blood quill had carved I must not tell lies in his skin. But then she seemed to remember that there were twenty other witnesses around them, and she snapped his notebook shut, a wave of her wand enough to repack Harry’s bag, the broken quill returning to a rigid and unbent state. “Sit down. Miss Granger!”

Filch shoved the bag at Harry’s chest, and he stumbled forward into the classroom. Everyone was staring at him. Harry ducked his head and skulked forward, sliding into the open seat next to Neville, who jumped. Ron, leaning across the space left between them, mouthed, What was that?, but Harry just shook his head, and then the clicking of Umbridge’s heels grew louder behind them, and the door shut with a bang, and Hermione filled in the empty seat.

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Harry, miraculously, kept quiet for the whole of class. He wasn’t sure what had gotten into him—well, he knew: he couldn’t help his mind turning back to Snape’s memories even as Umbridge droned on, but he wasn’t sure how it had manifested into this. Provoking Umbridge was a specialty of his. The whole lesson he could feel his classmates’ attention on him like he was some sort of bomb and they couldn’t see the fuse, only smell the smoke of it burning.

Is this what going to school with his father had been like? Had his classmates sat back, watching and waiting? Had they been safe in the knowledge that it was only Snape—it was only Umbridge—or had there been others? Had James been more like Snape was now, and preyed on whoever showed the slightest vulnerability? It was safe to say that Harry would never do something like what James had done, cruelty for the sake of entertainment, but he knew he could barely keep his mouth shut around Umbridge.

Of course, before this year it had always been Snape he would lose his tongue and temper with. Maybe Snape had been the same back then as he was now, hardly an innocent victim… but he hadn’t done anything, in the memory, and Sirius had been bored, and did it matter whether Snape was—well, was Snape or not?

The only benefit of these questions was that Harry was not paying enough attention to the lecture to get a headache from Umbridge’s voice. When the bell rang, he looked down at his notes. He had taken them automatically, and they were legible enough, but when Harry actually read them he realized he had somehow managed to write down only nouns. Whatever ‘green kappa cucumber snake basilisk library cat response’ meant, he had no clue, and he was unsure whether or not it had anything to do with the lecture. Professor Lupin had taught them against kappa and other magical creatures they might have to defend against in his third year, but Umbridge only mentioned creatures to remind them that goblins were not allowed wands because they were not human and werewolves and other ‘half-breeds’ were of pending status at the ministry and therefore ought to be handled like beasts.

That was normally where Harry would cut in, ruining whatever hope she had for getting through her lesson successfully. What she was teaching them was just wrong, in every sense. Beyond the outright bigotry, her closed-minded stick-to-the-book Ministry-knows-best methods were despicable
to him, and Harry was never the sort to stay quiet, even when speaking out hurt him. Literally: detention with Umbridge meant using the blood quill to carve dogma into his hand. But he would rather make Umbridge’s life living hell than bend to the tripe she was feeding them.

Sighing, Harry closed his notebook and slipped it into his bag, tapping the half-dry ink off his quill into the bottle. The other students were streaming out of the classroom, eager to get out from under Umbridge’s oppressive thumb and back to their common rooms, or the quidditch pitch, or the library. Harry, not looking forward to any of these, hurried out anyhow.

“Harry!”

Harry, holding back another sigh, turned around. He had hoped that he could slip out while Ron went off to quidditch practice and avoid Hermione altogether. He ought to have known she was more persistent than that.

“Aren’t you going to the library?” he asked.

“Yes, I have revisions for Runes to do, but Harry,” she looked around furtively and pulled Harry to the side of the hall. “I’ve been thinking—since there wasn’t anything else to do in that waste of a lesson, I just thought—we should finish the Notes. We could distribute them out, so everyone could carry on learning, even if we can’t meet anymore.”

“What?” Harry glanced back towards the open classroom door, where they could see the back of Umbridge’s gaudy pink robes. “If she found out she’d have my head put on display in the ministry foyer, or something.”

“Harry, that’s disgusting. I’m serious.”

“Look, it didn’t work, okay? We tried, but we failed. It’s over.”

Hermione shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest. “You think that just because Dumbledore’s gone it’s not worth trying to solve anything on our own?”

Harry winced. He’d spent all year wanting to do things on his own, but all the D.A. had accomplished was getting Dumbledore kicked out, and looking into Snape’s pensieve was only his latest mistake.

“Just, Harry… Promise me you’ll think about it?”

Harry replied with the noncommittal grunting noise that was beginning to dominate his vocabulary. Hermione just sighed.

“Do you want to come with me to the library?”

“No, I’m going upstairs.”

“Your head’s still hurting?”

“I’m just tired.”

“You really ought to go talk to Professor Snape.”

“Snape?” He felt himself recoil and tried to abort the motion, resulting in an awkward shudder. “Hermione, I didn’t tell you before, but… Snape’s discontinued the occlumency lessons.”

“What?” Hermione shrieked.
Harry stiffened as every head in the hall turned their way. At least he didn’t see Umbridge in the doorway. “Hermione,” he hissed.

“No—Harry, you have to have the lessons. Remember what Dumbledore—”

Finally she noticed that they were drawing attention and grabbed Harry again, marching him towards the moving staircases that would (hopefully) take them up to Gryffindor tower.

“He says, you know, I’ve got the basics down, I can just study on my own,” Harry explained as they went up. He was lying through his teeth. Snape had never said anything remotely positive about Harry’s attempts at occlumency.

“Harry, you’ve said a thousand times that Snape is a horrible teacher!”

“He is,” Harry agreed. “So it’s better off this way, anyhow.”

“It is not!” Hermione snapped back. She was marching with such intent that they were already nearing the portrait of the Fat Lady. “You don’t even get your homework done if I don’t remind you—you know it’s true—and you’ve never really tried at occlumency—I’ve never seen you reading or anything—how could he possibly think that you could—Mibulus Mibletonia—keep up on your own!”

“Thanks, Hermione,” Harry said dully as the portrait swung open at the password and the witch pulled him through. “Look, you’ve not studied occlumency, have you? Snape’s the expert. If he says we’re done with lessons, we’re done with lessons!”

She spun on him when they were inside. “Harry, I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation!” she hissed. “If you can’t keep Voldemort out of your head, then—”

“Then what?” Harry demanded. “The next Mr. Weasley, we never find out?”

The common room was very, very quiet. Hermione turned her best prefect’s glare on the group of first years gawking at her and they fled, chatter starting up again as the few groups of students scattered about turned away.

“You know that’s not your responsibility, Harry,” she insisted quietly. “Dumbledore said that you need to study occlumency, and—”

“And Snape said we’re done.” Harry was growing impatient. Even if he was bending the truth, Hermione was ignoring him completely. “And he’s here, and Dumbledore isn’t.”

“Well I have half a mind to go down to the dungeons and give Snape a piece of my mind! You need those lessons.”

“Well maybe you should!” It was Harry, this time, who spun on his heel, wrenching his arm free of her bruising grip as he pivoted about to storm up to his dorm. “Since you won’t listen to anything I say!” He turned back again, registering her shocked expression and charging on. “Bet you’ll listen to him, won’t you. Oh, Professor, of course, how could I not see that. If only Harry had explained. Well, I am explaining, but you’re not listening to me, so bugger off, butt out, and leave me alone!”

With that, and the open-mouthed expressions of Hermione and everyone else in the common room, and his blood pounding in his ears, Harry started up the stairs to his dormitory, footsteps echoing angrily as his words against the stone.
“You know what, Harry?” Hermione snapped. Harry froze. He knew that voice. That was Hermione’s final straw voice, her shrill and past logic voice, her ‘I don’t know whether to cry or scream’ voice. “I have had it about up to here with you and your—your—your utter lack of maturity!”

He slowly turned to face her. On the other side of the room, Dean and Seamus, settling into their usual seats, were snickering at them. Hermione was bristling like an angry cat as she stalked forward to get level with him on the step, jabbing at his chest with a pointed finger.

“Everyone is trying to help you, and you’re brushing us off like you don’t need it. Fine! I’ll leave you alone, if that’s what you really want. It’s more than you deserve. I just hope when you finally get ahold of yourself you don’t come around expecting everyone else to help you!”

She spun on heel and thundered off, earning wolf whistles from the two boys—hastily aborted as she turned her glare on them.

Ginny Weasley, coming in through the portrait at a dangerous time, had to flatten herself against the wall to avoid being run through. She glanced around, greeting Dean and Seamus, and quickly found Harry, meeting his dumbfound look with a raised eyebrow and a jerk of her head towards the portrait slamming shut behind her.

Harry shook his head, biting his cheek. He didn’t need to get himself into trouble with anyone else.

“Oh, come on,” Ginny ribbed, moving lightly across the common room to join him at the base of the stairs. “You’ve got to give me something. The most interesting thing to happen today was Burbage calling in Umbridge to deal with a firework.”

The fireworks were Fred and George’s handiwork. They’d released hundreds of them in the school on Tuesday, and since then the magical creations had begun to breed, spreading through the castle and causing all sorts of trouble. They were relatively easy to deal with (once you had one cornered, a good thwack with a broom or hex was enough to dissolve it) but several teachers had sworn they just couldn’t get the knack of it and insisted on calling Filch or Umbridge to the scene.

“She—it’s just—Hermione—I…” Harry swallowed, not really knowing what he could say about what had happened. He’d rather say nothing at all. “I just can’t always… talk to Hermione, you know, about… things.”

Ginny glanced back at the portrait hole. “Dad would tell you to talk, not shout,” she said, rolling her eyes. “But she’s certainly single-minded about things. And Ron has the emotional depth of a brick.”

Harry would give his friend more credit than that, but he definitely did not think Ron would understand his current problems. He scratched the back of his head, tugging at his hair, and finally realized that Ginny was in her wet quidditch gear and should have been down at the pitch. “What are you doing up here, anyways? Don’t you have practice?”

“Well, it was a disaster, so we’re taking a break,” she said breezily. She sat down on the bottom step, and after a moment of shifting from foot to foot Harry followed suit on the third one. He wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to Ginny any more than he wanted to talk to his two best friends, but after Hermione’s accusations it didn’t seem right to just shake her off. The staircase was wide enough that they wouldn’t be in anyone’s way, even with Ginny’s long legs stretched out across the stone, her back to the wall as she faced him halfway, the trailing ends of her quidditch robes pooling on the floor beneath her.

“How do you mean?”
“Let’s just say that five minutes before we even started someone had half the pitch to himself and not a bludger in sight and still managed to knock himself off his broom. Angelina and Ron are taking him to the Hospital Wing.” Ginny huffed. “And that was our competent beater.”

They both cringed at that. Since Umbridge banned Harry and the twins from quidditch, the already hurting team had been outright disgraceful. “Which one’s the competent one?” Harry asked.

“Sloper. Comparatively. I still can’t believe, in practice yesterday…”

Harry let her go on, not really paying attention. His blood was still pounding from shouting at Hermione, and he pushed the thumb of one hand around the palm of the other, bouncing a foot. Had he really lost control like that? She hadn’t been listening, but that was just Hermione. Shouting at her never made anything better, and if he’d held his tongue in Umbridge’s class, he should have at least been able to argue without shouting…

“Harry?”

Harry glanced at Ginny. She’d cut off her rant about Sloper’s ineptitude, and looked up at him uncertainly as she ran her fingers through her stringy wet hair.

“Sorry. I’m not really up for quidditch talk, Gin,” he said.

“Harry Potter, not up for talking quidditch. Call the press,” she said, laughing, but she didn’t quite seem sure enough of her sarcasm to make it work, and focused on extracting her fingers from a knot, lowering her voice. “You seem to be… really upset lately, Harry. Generally speaking. You’re not still on about that possession business, are you?”

Harry shook his head. She’d done a pretty good job of convincing him that he wasn’t being possessed by Voldemort back at Christmas, and thanks to the occlumency lessons he knew the dreams were some sort of mental link between them. He ground his teeth, trying not to think about occlumency, which might have worked if he were any good at it.

“Then it’s Cho, isn’t it. I mean, it’s just—you’ve known her for ages; if you just talk to her…”

“Cho…?” he echoed. To tell the truth, he had almost managed to forget about their disagreement the day before. Of course he was still angry with her—it had been her friend who had snitched on the D.A. and turned Dumbledore into a fugitive—frankly, though, the D.A. was proving more of a nuisance than a concern that day. “She—I don’t want to deal with her.”

Well, that wasn’t quite true. He wouldn’t mind being angry at Cho again, if only it would take his mind off everything else.

“Then what?” Ginny asked. “Because frankly, Harry, Hermione’s right. This is getting ridiculous. You spend almost as much time arguing with us as you do Umbridge.”

Harry glanced around the common room again. Aside from Parvati and Lavender, who were arguing loudly over a Witch Weekly article as if trying to get someone else to step in, everyone was absorbed in their books or chess games, or quiet conversations. Even the portraits had gathered together in one painting, seated around a round table and holding some sort of debate.

“I… I want to talk to Sirius,” he admitted, watching as a first year nearly upturned one of the lurking dangers of Fred and George’s expanding experiments, one of the several piles of packages near the fire that wobbled when anyone breathed too hard. Kenneth Towler, a seventh-year prefect sitting a few meters away and absorbed in a NEWT study guide, gave the girl a cool glance and went back to his reading. Their problems seemed so simple, compared to his.
“So,” Ginny said slowly, pushing her hair back over her shoulder. “Talk to him, then.”

“Ginny,” Harry said flatly, digging his nails into his palm. “I’d do anything to talk to him, but I can’t. Umbridge already caught us on the floo once this year. Two days ago she tried to get his location out of me—I think she tried to slip me veritaserum in my tea. And she’s screening the mail.”

“You’re going about this all wrong.”

“What? How am I supposed to get a hold of him—”

“You’re starting from the assumption that you can’t do something, and that’s a bad choice if I’ve ever heard one.”

Across the room, the portrait hole opened and let in a gust of cold air, and the wobbling pile collapsed, covering everyone around the fire in a cloud of fine pink dust. Kenneth, as pink as the rest of them, slammed his book shut and stormed out through the open entrance with curses for Fred and George on his lips. Most everyone else burst into laughter.

Ginny raised a hand and pointed at the chaos. “You think Fred and George would get anywhere if they listened when they were told what they can’t do? Hell no. They laugh in everyone’s faces and do it anyways. If talking to Sirius is going to solve your problems, then you need to figure out how to do it.”

“I can’t,” he repeated. “It’d get him arrested.”

“I’d like to see the Umbitch try,” Ginny said vehemently. “Actually, getting them in the same room together sounds great. We should do that.”

“Ginny,” Harry started to stand up—he didn’t want to listen to this anymore; it wasn’t helping at all—but she caught him by the wrist and tugged him back down.

“Sorry,” she said, searching his face. “Look, why do you need to get a hold of him?”

“I just—I just want to talk to him, you know?” Harry muttered. With the commotion, no one was paying attention to them, but Harry still felt his cheeks flaming as he tried to subtly scrub the frustrated tears threatening to escape his eyes. It was just the dust irritating them, surely. “It doesn’t matter. It’s impossible.”

Across the room, Ron came in through the portrait hole, no doubt to fetch his sister. He paused at the pink tinge to the room, and Harry tried to start up again, to get up the stairs before he was spotted, but Ginny’s grip was tight. “Nothing is impossible, Harry,” she said firmly, and used his arm to pull herself up before finally letting go. “We’ll find you a way.”

Harry shook his head even as he turned away, Ron having spotted them and given a little wave. “Have fun at practice,” he muttered.

“Harry,” Ginny tried again, exasperation in her voice, but he stormed up the stairs with listening, retreating back to the empty dormitory.

Exhausted again, he flopped back on his bed for the rest he’d been aiming at earlier and pulled the bed curtains closed around him. Ginny was one thing, but Ron was… well, as she had described him, sometimes. An emotional brick. He didn’t think he could face that.
He dreamt.

At first, he found himself walking down a winding hall—not the hall of the Department of Mysteries, but a hall lined with the familiar stone walls of Hogwarts. No matter how he turned, the hall never ended; it seemed to go on for hours. He was walking in the shadow of the memory of Snape, who seemed not to notice that all the portraits had been replaced with mirrors, reflecting the book his hooked nose was crammed in back at him. There were other people reflected in the mirrors, too, faces Harry might associate with Hogwarts: teachers, classmates, some he didn’t know but wore the uniform black robes. When Harry caught his own reflection, he realized he wasn’t himself at all but rather the young James, and that Sirius was on his right, adult and very grim, and Lupin and Peter Pettigrew trailed behind, all just as he remembered them on that night in the Shrieking Shack two years before.

Finally Snape, nose still in the book, walked forward when the hall turned, straight into and through a mirror with backwards letters carved in it’s tarnished frame. Harry hesitated, trying to read what they said, for it was not the Mirror of Erised as he remembered it, but Sirius put his hand on his back to nudge him through.

On the other side of the mirror, they found themselves walking out of the Great Hall filled with desks, following Snape’s ever present back. When they followed Snape out into the sunlight, however, they all seemed to change, falling back into the memory. Harry stayed in the shadows, separating from James, who strode forward. Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew seemed to shed their age by stepping into the light, and they all waltzed laughingly on, settling on the grass under the tree James had chosen.

He didn’t want to hear what they were saying. He knew, of course, but he didn’t hear the words until James sprung to his feet and pointed his wand, shouting, “Levicorpus!”

Harry couldn’t take it: he ran forward. “Stop! Put him down!” As in the pensieve, no one seemed to hear him, but Snape’s glittering black eyes stared accusingly into his.

Another voice cried out: “Stop!”

Harry turned. It was Lily, jumping barefoot from the lake, red hair fanning out behind her as she barreled towards them, but as Harry watched, James, Sirius, and Peter turned into his Uncle Vernon, Aunt Marge, and Ripper the bulldog. Ripper charged past Harry, nearly toppling him, but when he managed to turn it wasn’t Snape in the tree, it was Harry: eight years old and clinging desperately on as the dog sunk its teeth into his ankle.

“Him,” he could hear Dudley’s unmistakable voice. Harry turned back, but it wasn’t an eight-year-old Dudley he was confronted with, but a fifteen-year-old, pale and cold, raising a shaking hand to point at Harry, as ghastly as he had been after the dementor attack in Little Whinging. Even as he watched, Dudley grew taller and narrower, until he had shifted into James again, as Harry knew him from the photos he had seen, but his kind face had turned as stony as Snape’s ever was. “Him.”

“Harry!”

Aunt Petunia started shrieking.

“FREAK! WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY DARLING DIDDYKINS?”
Someone grabbed Harry and whirled him about. Everything else fell away but Lily—no, Ginny—who looked at Harry, that gentle, quiet, sad smile on her face.

“Nothing is impossible, you know.”

“HARRY!”

Thrown all at once back into Gryffindor tower, Harry leapt back—which failed to do anything but tangle his legs in his covers and knock his skull against the headboard. Harry groaned, rubbing at the tender spot and blinking up at the blurry figure indignantly.

“Oh Harry!” came Hermione’s most worried voice. “Was it—was it him again?”

“What…?” Harry fumbled about for his glasses, finding them on the side table. Night had fallen on Gryffindor tower, so he must have slept through dinner. “What are you doing in here, Hermione?” he asked as he found her face wide eyed and claustrophobically close.

“Harry, if it was another of—another of those dreams, you need to go talk to—Professor McGonagall, or Professor Snape!”

Harry blinked at her blankly and glanced around. The dorm was otherwise empty, but Ron was lingering in the doorway, extra pale beneath his freckles. It made Harry’s stomach twist. As far as Ron knew, the last time Harry had woken from one of his ‘Voldemort dreams’, Mr. Weasley had been bleeding out in the underbelly of the ministry. Of course, if could be that he was simply chilled from quidditch practice, since his hair was plastered to his face by the rain and there was mud splattered up his trousers, robes probably drying down by the fire.

“No,” Harry said firmly, meeting his friend’s eyes. “Just a dream. A normal one.”

Hermione didn’t look convinced, but Harry wrestled his legs out of the twisted bed sheets and slid out the side opposite her. He stretched, cracking his neck, trying to shake off the tension of that dream. A nightmare, really, just as much as he’d qualify any of the usual stuff. He’d always imagined Dudley growing up into a clone of Uncle Vernon, complete with an Aunt Petunia to dote on him, but now—the thought of Dudley growing up into his dad—or into Snape—or Harry growing into Snape…

“...and I figured we could all do it together… Harry?”

He tried to speak but was overcome with a yawn. At least he had a moment to try and push away the circulating thoughts. “Uh, homework? Sure. Let me just…” He glanced down at his trunk, still a mess from earlier. “Er… which class?”

Hermione just sighed, giving the haphazard heaps a disapproving glare, but her voice remained hesitant. “Charms, Harry; it’s on your revision schedule.”

For a moment, Harry stared at her, bleary-eyed, trying to figure out why she looked so nervous. She was twisting one of the curls falling over her shoulder around her finger, a habit she usually corrected. She’d accepted readily enough that Harry’s dream was a normal one, but…
Then Harry remembered their shouting match. He swallowed and looked away.

Luckily his charms books were on his nightstand, not buried. For once, Harry didn’t mind the prospect of homework: with Hermione focused on that, she wouldn’t be badgering him about occlumency and they wouldn’t have to follow up their argument. Besides, he didn’t think he’d be able to get back to sleep with that nightmare haunting him, so it wasn’t as if he had anything else to do.

Fate, however, had other plans for him. As soon as they managed to claim a set of seats tucked halfway under the staircase, Harry on a sofa and Hermione and Ron each in an armchair, two others joined them, climbing over the back of the sofa to slide in on either side of Harry and slinging their arms over his shoulders.

“Harry!” Fred said.

“Good man!” George added.

“We hear you have need…”

“…of some help breaking the rules!”

“Never fear. So long as the Umbitch is concerned, we’d do just about anything to rub her nose in shit.”

“Metaphorically speaking.”

“Or not.”

“Even if that means contacting a fugitive on the lam.”

Harry was confused until Ginny, out of her quidditch robes and small in one of Fred’s old Christmas sweaters, appeared, propping herself on the arm of Ron’s chair. He still gaped.

“…why…?”

“I told you.” She smiled. It looked a bit like baring her teeth. “Nothing is impossible.”

Harry winced, half from the third repetition of the line and half from Hermione’s accusatory glare.

“Harry,” she scolded, though she still seemed hesitant to contradict him. “You know Professor Dumbledore needs to stay as far away from here as possible.”

“Not Dumbledore. I don’t have a clue where he is. It’s Siri—er, Snuffles. But I told you, Ginny, Umbridge will find out for sure.”

“Exactly.” Hermione seemed relieved that she was in agreement with Harry about this. “She’s got all the mail going through screening, you know? Who knows which of her ‘inquisitorial squad’ is reading it. And the floo is all locked down, too, and—”

“Not quite all the floo,” Fred cut in.

“There’s one that’s not being watched.”

“Her office.”

“ Heard her bragging about it to Filch.”
“How she can talk to the Minister any time.”

“Horrid thought, isn’t it? Imagine her calling up Fudge in her nighty…”

They were grinning, but Hermione shook her head. “Don’t be daft,” she said. “It’s far too risky to try to use hers.”

“Her office is all locked up, anyways,” Ron added, trying to yank his book out from under his sister. “How would you even get in?”

“The knife,” Harry realized. “S—Snuffles gave me a knife—can get through any lock. Could definitely get through anything Umbridge could cast.”

“Harry, no.” Hermione’s head was sinking, or her shoulders rising, and her eyebrows pushed together to carve lines in her forehead. “Professor Umbridge will catch you. What could possibly be so important that you would risk getting caught—getting Snuffles caught?”

The twins saved him from having to answer. “That’s the beauty of it, Hermione,” said Fred. “What Harry needs is—”

“A diversion,” Ron finished for them.

“Exactly, dear brother. So the plan is this…”

“Tomorrow evening, just after supper, we’ll block off the whole Great Hall, except for one path…”

“…which we know leads to a trick passage in the dungeons, goes on and on no matter how far you go…”

That sounded familiar. Disturbingly so. Harry wondered if it was lined with mirrors, too.

“…where we’ll set off the big stuff.”

“You know. Boom. Umbridge will go running with Filch, and get trapped down there.”

“Snape isn’t going to warn her; she annoys him just as much as any of us.”

“And the brute squad is too dumb to realize.”

“Meanwhile, Harry here will be up in her office…”

“…chatting away with his beloved canine friend…”

“…and everyone will come away sunshine and rainbows.”

Hermione was unimpressed. “There are a hundred ways that could go wrong,” she said. “How, exactly, are you going to seal off the Great Hall? And what if Professor Umbridge doesn’t fall for your diversion? Or if she knows about this passage which, by the way, I’ve never heard of, and goes up to her office straight away?”

Harry felt the twins’ grips on his opposite shoulders tighten for a moment, but when he looked to his right Fred’s grin hadn’t slipped at all and was, if it was possible, even wider than before. He had the same halfway-feral look that Ginny had when she’d sat down. “Oh, Hermione; dear, sweet Hermione. You underestimate our bag of tricks. We didn’t say that was all we were going to do.”
“Dear Professor Umbridge is going to have one hell of an evening,” George agreed with low delight.

Harry wanted to agree, he really did, but the more he thought about it, the more it sounded like something his dad—the version of his dad that he’d seen in Snape’s memory, at least—would have done, and that was the root of the problem to begin with. Umbridge was a bully, it was true, and she deserved as bad as Fred and George could dole out. But there were still those lingering doubts lurking in the back of his mind. If Harry agreed to this, he’d be just as bad as—as bad as his dad. If Harry didn’t think Snape, who was about as awful a person as there was, didn’t deserve the sort of treatment he’d faced in the memory, who was he to say that Umbridge did?

“No diversion,” he said before anyone else could speak.

“Thank you, Harry.” Hermione brought her book pointedly up again. “So we can all put this nonsense behind us.”

“But Harry,” said Ginny, confused. “You said you’d do anything to talk to him.”

He shrugged. “We just don’t need to make a big production of it, is all. It’ll look suspicious.”

“Not to mention,” Ron added thoughtfully, “If Harry is missing when something as big as all that goes down, she’ll know. She’s always watching him.”

Fred and George were exchanging disappointed sounds over his head. “Come on, Harry,” Ginny said. “How are you going to be sure the Umbitch won’t come stomping in?”

He thought about it for a moment, but Ron spoke again. "We’ve got a gap tomorrow, ten until lunch. Do you have defense, Gin?"

She shook her head.

“We do,” the twins said.

“A double block,” Fred clarified.

“What do you have in mind?” George asked.

“Well, if you have Defense, then Harry doesn’t need to worry about that, because she’ll have to be in class with you.”

“That’s not enough to risk it,” Hermione insisted. “It’s not just these two causing trouble these days, and you know it. She could be pulled out of class at any moment.”

“Then we’ll just have to let Harry know as soon as she leaves,” George said, a bit shortly. The twins only had so much patience for Hermione’s rule-bound cynicism.

“I like it,” Ginny said. “More subtle than most of what we’ve been pulling.”

Ron gave her an odd look, but Ginny just rolled the hairband from her wrist and started braiding it. She had been helping out Fred and George with their pranks for years, as anyone who had seen her walking into the Gryffindor common room with a certain smug smile knew. It was unclear whether Fred and George had brought her into the fold following the disaster that had been her first year or if she had started providing it whether they wanted her to or not.

“And how exactly are you going to let him know?” Hermione snapped, clapping her book shut again. “Send an owl?”
“The D.A. galleons,” Harry said. He had his in his pocket out of habit, even though the D.A. was through, and fished it out to hold up. “It gets hot when you change the message. That’d be enough to warn me.”

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but it had been her idea to pass the D.A. meeting times that way. She ground her teeth.

“Perfect,” Ginny said, pulling out her own. “Hermione, could you teach the rest of us the spell?”

“Well, yes, I could,” Hermione said. “But this is still a terribly risky idea!”

“I’m going to do it either way,” said Harry. He hadn’t realized he’d made up his mind until that moment, but when he spoke the words he felt himself committing wholly to the new plan. “But if you teach Fred and George the spell it’d go a lot more smoothly.”

“It’s a good plan,” George admitted, rolling his coin in the fingers of his free hand.

“But Harry,” Fred pressed. “We could—”

“I said no.” Harry shrugged the twins’ arms from his shoulders. “Look. I appreciate it, really. And if you don’t want to bother with the galleons, that’s fine too. I don’t want any of you getting in trouble for this. It’s not worth giving Umbridge the satisfaction.”

The twins deflated somewhat, but then they turned their attention back to Hermione, who reluctantly taught them the charm. She didn’t speak to Harry for the rest of the night, even when the twins and Ginny cleared out and left the three fifth years to sit up late together finishing their charms essays and then their transfiguration. In the end, Harry remained on his sofa far after Ron and Hermione had gone out on patrol, only moving up to the dormitory when Kenneth Towler came in and found Harry dozing on the sofa.

It wasn’t until the end of Transfiguration the next day, while everyone was finishing up a short in-class assignment, that Hermione finally caught his eye again. She tapped pointedly on her notebook, mimed turning the page, and started writing. After a moment, Harry looked down and flipped to his next page, where Hermione’s handwriting was appearing at the top, spelling out: You need to reconsider.

Harry nearly laughed, and ducked his head before Professor McGonagall noticed. Hermione, of all people, was passing notes in class; but of course she was doing it in the most complicated way possible just to lecture him for breaking the rules.

I’ve made up my mind, he wrote underneath. He wasn’t sure if that would work, but a moment later she wrote back.

You’re going to run into trouble.

Why didn’t you do this spell for the DA meetings

I did. This is another variation on the Protean Charm, but it wouldn’t have worked as well as the simple and subtle version we employed for the galleons. Like your plan, it would have been wholly
You already did your part, Harry wrote. So don’t worry about it. It’ll only be me.

Ron, glancing over his shoulder, nudged Harry like he wanted to add something, but the bell rang and their conversation was lost to the fray of chairs scraping across the stone floors away from desks. Harry turned to address Hermione out loud, but she had already shoved her things into her bag, and her hair was frizzing up with what he recognized as a particularly violent anger.

“I tried to warn you! Remember that when you’re expelled!” Hermione hissed, slamming the flap of her bag down as forcefully as she could. Harry turned to watch her storm out of the classroom.

“Blimey,” said Ron. “You’d think you’d told her you were marching out to face You-Know-Who on your own, or something.”

Voldemort, Ron, Harry almost corrected, just because Hermione wasn’t there to say it herself.

Filch came in through the door moments after Hermione stormed out, grinning horribly as he stopped students and probed their bags. Harry exchanged a glance with Ron. The invisibility cloak was in his bag, after all, and while it probably wasn’t a prohibited item (Dumbledore had been the one to give it to him, though that could mean anything) he certainly didn’t want Umbridge finding out about it. His knife, on the other hand, would definitely be confiscated. Harry wasn’t even sure if it was legal.

“Mr. Potter!” Professor McGonagall suddenly called. Harry looked at Ron again, who shrugged, turning to exit the nearly empty classroom. Harry moved to the front.

“Yes, Professor?” he said, not without a bit of quaver to his voice. He didn’t think he’d done anything she’d have heard about since the D.A. was caught Monday, but McGonagall had a knack for sensing trouble and could be trying to put an end to his plan before it even started.

“Take these and follow me,” she commanded, depositing into his arms a pile of books that nearly made him lose his balance. She grabbed another armful and marched purposefully past Filch, Harry trailing behind and narrowly dancing out of the way of the old caretaker’s swipe at his bag. McGonagall’s office was easily reached up a short stairway Harry had never taken before, and she led him inside, gesturing for Harry to deposit his stack on a squat armchair that sat in front of the desk. While he did so, she rounded the table and started gathering things for her next class, pushing her tin of biscuits toward him. Harry hadn’t spent much time in her office, but he imagined the tin was the same one she’d had at the beginning of the year when Harry had been sent to her by Umbridge for speaking out in class. “Biscuit, Mr. Potter?”

“Er, thanks,” he said, nibbling at one cautiously. “Was there anything else you needed?”

McGonagall looked up, and after a moment’s pause waved her wand towards the door. It remained open, but Harry thought he saw the telltale shimmer of magic stretching across the opening like a shield charm.

“Mr. Potter,” she said, sagging suddenly in the tall chair behind the desk. Harry blinked at her in alarm. “With Albus out of the castle, you cannot be too careful.”

“Er, yes, ma’am,” he agreed awkwardly. Did she know about his plan?

“Whatsoever you do, stay out of her grasp,” she advised warily. “Of course you have to attend her class, but do try to keep your head down, Mr. Potter.”

“I… I’m trying, Professor,” he said, and for once it was entirely in earnest. “Even she couldn’t
complain at all about me in class yesterday.”

“I’m sure she would find something.” McGonagall’s voice was dry as she glanced up at him with the barest hint of a smile, but then she pressed her hands into the desk and slowly stood again, bending her body back to its usual rigidity. “I mean it, Mr. Potter. You’re on track to set the record for most detentions in a single year, and that’s only from one class.” She sighed as she added another book to the stack she was gathering. “Normally, at this point we would be taking steps to separate the two of you. Unfortunately, she has wormed her way into the headmistress position—” She cut herself off, glancing towards the door. “I’m afraid nothing short of You-Know-Who himself showing up in the middle of Diagon Alley will resolve this situation, and that would be far too costly.”

“Professor,” Harry asked suddenly, rubbing the back of his right hand with his left. “Hypothetically, if a Professor were caught trying to use veritaserum on a student without telling them, what would happen?”

“Veritaserum?” She raised an eyebrow. “That is a question for Professor Snape, Mr. Potter.”

Harry’s shoulders fell. He supposed he could get Hermione to look it up in the library. He knew it was illegal, but maybe that didn’t apply to Umbridge, as a Ministry official…

“Hypothetically,” McGonagall said after a long moment. Harry looked up and found her giving Harry a level look. “They could be arrested and tried for a number of different charges which, depending on which Professor it was, could range from possession and use of a controlled substance, interrogation without a warrant, improper investigation conduct, investigation against a minor without the presence of a legal advisor or guardian, and trespassing on the Hogwarts grounds following a violation of their contract. And probably a dozen or so more specific laws, depending on the case. I am not a legal professional, Mr. Potter.”

Nodding, Harry tucked away that information, unsure of whether or not he could do anything with it. Most likely not by himself. He wouldn’t even have a clue where to start.

“Hypothetically, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall went on slowly. “As Deputy Headmistress, it would be my duty to inform the appropriate authorities if such an allegation were made. However, without an appropriate amount of evidence, the investigation would be dropped, causing a great deal of stir without necessarily helping the victim or harming the accused. The ‘appropriate amount’ being declared by the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot which, as you know, is a role currently being filled in the interim by none other than Minister Fudge. Hypothetically, would you say the student you had in mind would have enough evidence?”

“No,” said Harry.

The first bell rang, and McGonagall picked up the stack of books she’d gathered. “You had better move along, Mr. Potter. If you are ever in a situation where you feel so unsafe, I would advise you to come find me immediately. But for goodness sake, keep your head down!”

Ducking into the toilet closest to McGonagall’s office and hiding in a stall, Harry pulled out the Marauder’s Map, Fred and George’s second contribution to this plan, since they had gifted it to him two years before. Black ink spread out from his wand as he whispered the oath: I solemnly swear I
am up to no good. Harry peered down at it, following the names and trails of footsteps as they formed on the page.

Mostly students were getting settled in their next classes; he quickly found the twins in the DADA room, and Professor Umbridge nearby, stopped alongside Lee Jordan. The path to her office, which was a previously unused one on the second floor and closer to the traditional Headmaster’s office rather than the one connected to the regular DADA classroom, was mostly clear. Filch was still lurking outside the transfiguration classroom, where McGonagall was leading the students gathered outside in. He folded up the map without wiping it blank, shoving it into his bag.

Under the invisibility cloak, Harry’s trip was quick: most students avoided getting too close to Umbridge’s office if they could help it. Even easier was getting through the door. All he had to do was run the knife along the seam between the door and its frame, and it swung silently open. He hurried inside and closed it.

Making the call to Grimmauld Place should have been just as easy. A fire sprang to life in the hearth as the door opened, and a china bowl painted with pink bows held floo powder on the mantle. In his pocket, the galleon was cool to the touch. All he had to do was take a few quick steps—but he didn’t. He stood in the doorway for several minutes, until the class bell rang, startling him to nearly trip over the dragging bottom of the cloak.

Harry swore under his breath, rushing across the room. He didn’t have time to dawdle! He had committed to the plan and had to follow through. There was no time to let himself hesitate.

Ignoring the faint mewing of cats from Umbridge’s horrible office decorations and the temptation of his firebolt padlocked in the corner with the twins’ brooms, Harry took a small handful of floo powder from the dish, mindful not to spill any, and knelt on the hearth. He hated floo travel. Playing with fire was fine for wizards, but Harry had a muggle upbringing. This time it would only be his head he put through the fire, which was even stranger thought than usual. But he took a deep breath, hooked the hood of his cloak off his head, and grasped at the galleon in his pocket all at once, and with that he squeezed his eyes shut, cast the floo powder down, and shoved his head into the flames, calling clearly: “Grimmauld Place!”

When he opened his eyes again, Harry was greeted by the familiar sight of the dining room of his Godfather’s house. He blinked, getting used to the strange tint of his vision, and found the room had three occupants: Lupin, seated at the table but twisted in his seat to face Sirius, who was currently engaged in a sort of tug-of-war with Kreacher. He could hear the sound of Mrs. Black screaming in the hallway, but none of them seemed to be paying any attention to her.

“YOU BLASTED ELF!” Sirius was snarling.

“Sirius, please,” Lupin said, voice strained. “It’s just a photo. What harm could it do for him to keep it?”

“What harm—! It’s going in the bin! Better yet, the fire!”

“Master is destroying important heirlooms to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black,” Kreacher wheezed, remarkably loudly for an elf of his age. “Master would replace them all with mudblood filth, Master and his wretched dog. Kreacher must protect the House.”

“THAT’S IT!”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Lupin said, turning back around. When he did, he finally noticed Harry’s head in the fire and jumped from his seat. “Harry!” Behind him, his chair toppled to the floor, and
Sirius turned in surprise. “Are you alright? What happened?”

Harry winced. “Er, I, uh, need to talk to Sirius. Both of you, I mean. But I don’t have much time.”

“Are you safe?” Sirius demanded. Kreacher took advantage of the distraction to pull with all his might, finally wrenching the picture frame out of Sirius’s grasp, the elf toppling over with the effort. Sirius rounded on him, jabbing his finger towards the door. “OUT! NOW!”

Kreacher slunk past the fallen chair, clutching the picture frame to the ratty pillowcase he wore and continuing to mutter to himself, but Harry couldn’t hear what he was saying. Nothing good, no doubt. In the hall, Mrs. Black’s screaming quieted, but before that and faster than Harry would have thought possible, Sirius and Lupin were racing across the kitchen.

“What happened?” Sirius repeated, sliding the last few strides on his knees to look down into the fireplace, scanning Harry like he expected grievous injury. “Are you alright?”

Lupin crouched beside him, looking just as worried.

“I’m fine,” Harry insisted. “It’s just— Umbridge is screening mail, and there’s something I needed to ask you about. I’m in her floo, so I haven’t got much time.”

He saw his godfather exchange a glance with Lupin, but it was too quick for Harry to read. “Fire away,” said Sirius.

Now that he was face to face with them, Harry wasn’t sure how to start. “Well… I’ve been studying occlumency, uh, with Snape, you see…”

The two men nodded as he trailed off. Sirius had been there when Snape told him about the lessons, but he wondered if Dumbledore had told everyone. More likely, Snape had been complaining about his lack of progress to the whole Order. Harry flushed. Luckily they wouldn’t be able to tell through the glow of the floo.

“Well, I… I made a bit of a mistake,” he hurried on. “Snape was out—there was an explosion upstairs, the twins—and I looked into—he kept a pensieve. I thought…”

He trailed off. He couldn’t bring himself to explain why he had looked into the pensieve now. It seemed foolish.

“You looked into Snape’s pensieve?” Lupin finished for him.

“Yes,” said Harry. “And I saw something that… it didn’t make much sense.”

Lupin and Sirius exchanged another glance. “Go on,” Sirius urged.

“It was…” Harry bit his lip. There was no avoiding it, and hadn’t he come here to ask? He was the one who’d gotten fixated on talking to Sirius, convinced it would help, and he’d gotten Hermione and all the Weasleys in on the trouble. “Just… it was a memory. Of Snape’s. From when he took his OWLs, and…” He licked his lips, thumbing the galleon, forcing himself to look at their faces as they dawned with recognition. “You guys were outside, and he wasn’t doing anything, and dad thought it would be funny…”

“Oh, Harry,” said Lupin with a sigh, settling back on his haunches.

“…and he, dad, he hung Snape upside-down by his ankles, and everyone laughed at it.”
“I remember that,” Sirius said.

“Just… why does one ever tell me these things? That my dad was a bully?” Harry managed to finish.

“I wouldn’t call James a bully, Harry,” Sirius said quickly. “Mean, sometimes, we definitely were a pair of little snots, but we were young, and stupid.”

“I’m the same age you were,” Harry pointed out, not sure how age was supposed to negate anything. “And mum seemed convinced. She hated dad. How could they end up married?”

Sirius laughed. It sounded a bit hollow. “Lily didn’t hate him. But James was a right prat around her. He was always chasing after her, but Lily couldn’t stand how immature he was. Rejected him for years.”

“He seemed like a bit of an idiot. With his hair. And that snitch.” The two men laughed a bit, which wasn’t what Harry was going for—“What changed?” he asked.

“He grew up,” Sirius said simply. “We all did. Never learned to like Snape or his nasty friends, though…”

“Harry,” Lupin took over. “You must understand—what we did wasn’t right, of course, but it’s not who we start out that makes us who we are. It’s how we grow and change, who we choose to be.”

Harry shifted his attention to the man. Suddenly more angry than before, he clenched his fingers more tightly around the galleon. “You didn’t do anything, in the memory,” he said flatly. “You were a prefect, and you just sat by and let them.”

“And I regret it. If I could change how I behaved, I would.”

Harry was unconvinced. “In third year, that day with the boggart, you knew Neville’s boggart was Snape. You let him make Snape into—in front of the whole class, you had him do that, and you knew it would get around.”

“Snape would be my boggart too, if I had him for a teacher,” Sirius grumbled. Lupin elbowed him sharply.

“I still have a good deal of growing to do, I guess,” Lupin said. “I’m afraid I went back to Hogwarts and fell back into my old patterns. I should have known better…”

“I told you before, Harry: the world’s not so clear cut in good and evil,” Sirius cut in. “Or good people and bullies. We were little shits, it’s true.”

“And being a good person isn’t a trait, it’s an act. Or a habit, really; an act repeated over and over again,” Lupin agreed. “Same as being a bad person. No one was born evil.”

“Even Voldemort?” Harry challenged.

The two men were quiet for a moment.

“I’m sure, at some point… Even Voldemort has probably done something selfless,” Lupin said hesitantly. “I’m afraid not much is known about the man behind the name.”

Harry thought back to his second year and the murderous diary of Tom Riddle. He somehow doubted Lupin’s sentiment—but that was off topic. Voldemort was definitely evil, no matter Sirius’s philosophy, but his dad…
“I just don’t get it,” he said. “How could you all be friends, if dad was… like that.”

“Well, I was just as bad,” Sirius said. “But—”

He was cut off by a loud crash in the hallway, and Mrs. Black started screaming again. It was Sirius who stood, using Lupin as an unsteady support, pulling out his wand as he hurried across the room. Harry stared at his back in disappointment.

“We were all just as bad,” Lupin said.

“Sirius was the one to urge him on,” Harry said darkly as his Godfather disappeared through the door. “It was Snape because… because he was there, and Sirius was bored. Were there others, too?”

Lupin hesitated again. “It was mostly Snape,” he admitted. That didn’t mean there weren’t others, Harry noted, a cold feeling settling in his throat despite the floo. “James and Sirius met him on the train, I think, and had it out for him from the first. What did he say, when he found out you’d looked?”

Harry winced. “He was angrier than I’ve ever seen him. Said the lessons were done. Threw a—”

“Done with the lessons?” Lupin echoed, straightening with alarm. “Harry, you have to continue. Promise me you’ll go to him. Apologize. Those lessons are the only thing—”

“Did you ever apologize?” Harry demanded. Maybe it was a low blow, but he was sick of people telling him to go back. First Hermione, now Lupin. Didn’t they understand that Harry had crossed a line he could never uncross? “Dad and Sirius humiliated him, and you just sat by and watched. You never even tried to stop them.”

Lupin looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Harry, it’s no excuse, but… I wasn’t exactly the most popular boy in school. Your dad and Sirius never judged me, not before they figured out what I was, and not after. And I—Harry?”

The galleon was burning in his pocket. Harry swore, glancing at the kitchen doorway, hoping in vain Sirius would come back through. “I have to go,” he said shortly.

Lupin nodded. “Harry, promise me you’ll talk to Snape. We can discuss this over the holidays, in person, but the lessons can’t wait for that.”

“Someone’s coming,” Harry said. He wasn’t about to make promises he couldn’t keep.

“Be safe,” Lupin said.

Harry pulled his head out of the fire, tugging up his hood with one hand as he pulled out the map with the other. There was hardly anyone in the halls, so Umbridge wasn’t hard to find. Nearly overlapping with her name was that of Colin Creevey.

They were still far enough away that he dared open the door to escape her office, and managed to get a safe distance from her office before she came into view. Sure enough, she had Colin by the ear, his camera in her other hand and a firework chasing after them, and was soon dragging the boy up the step and through the door.

“Sorry, Colin,” Harry whispered as he fled.
For the second day in a row, Harry decided to skip lunch, going up to the owlery where he was sure to be alone with all the rain, only to find a gate with heavy iron bars and a slot that would take mail to Umbridge to be searched. He couldn’t see Hedwig inside, either, so he didn’t bother to break in with the knife. It wouldn’t be worth it.

Harry wandered around inside for a while, but the usual haunts were inaccessible: when she got out of class Hermione would be in the common room or the Library, and Harry didn’t want to face her; the hallway that housed the Room of Requirements had been sectioned off; the house elves probably reported to Umbridge if anyone went in the kitchens now, and Harry didn’t think he could face the excitable Dobby’s particular brand of enthusiasm, anyways. In the end he found an empty room near Ravenclaw tower, too small to be a classroom but not used for storing anything, and settled down on the wide window ledge that took up the wall opposite the door. There were papers spellotaped to the walls here and there. The closest cluster looked like alchemy or runes homework, but the ink was faded and the pages yellowed and Harry wasn’t curious enough to take a closer look. He looked instead down the green slope. At the edge of the Forbidden Forest, third years were huddled in groups over flobberworm boxes, small dots of black next to Hagrid’s lumbering form. Beyond that, the forest stretched out into the hills, where it blurred into the gray of the rain.

Before he knew it, the bell was ringing for the three PM class change, and he had to race down to the grounds for his turn at the flobberworms. Ron raised an eyebrow when he came skidding to a halt in the mud, robes hiked up to his knees, but they weren’t about to have a conversation anywhere Malfoy could hear it and Hermione was ignoring them anyways, so they spent the hour trying to coax the flobberworms to eat more lettuce. One spit a glob of mucus onto Neville’s face, much to the Slytherins’ amusement and Lavender’s shrieking disgust, so he got to claim the most misery, but by the time their two hours were up the whole class was soaked through from head to toe.

After class, Hermione and Ron split off without Harry needing to slip away, Hermione to the Library and Ron to another try at quidditch practice. Harry returned to the common room and found himself at a loss. For once he thought he’d rather not be alone. Talking to Sirius and Lupin hadn’t provided the closure he’d hoped for and Harry wasn’t looking forward to dwelling on it any longer.

Instead, he took a free armchair next to Fred and George’s teetering piles and dug in his bag. He didn’t want to deal with Defense and didn’t think he could focus enough for Transfiguration. The only other textbook in his bag was for Potions, and he pulled it out, a furrow forming between his eyebrows as he considered the book.

When Harry had first started at Hogwarts, he had been excited for Potions. It had sounded like cooking to him, and he had been cooking since primary school, so he’d thought in that class at least he might be on par with the kids who’d been around magic all their lives. Snape had squashed that hope within minutes of the first class, and it hadn’t gotten any better since. He could count on one hand the number of ‘A’ grade potions he’d brewed that year, and he’d never earned an ‘E’ or an ‘O’ on an assignment.

He flipped through the book, looking at the different potions they’d already tackled. This one he had failed because Snape had made Hermione cry, and Harry had been so livid his hands had been shaking. That one, Crabbe and Goyle had been shooting spitballs across the room whenever Snape’s back was turned, and all the Gryffindors had been marked down for improper brewing. One, Harry’s hand had been so injured from detention with Umbridge he hadn’t been able to both stir and add ingredients at the same time.
Some of them he thought were just impossible. He still wasn’t sure how he was supposed to be able to chop ingredients and stir at the same time, which was necessary for one potion they’d been required to make alone. And the memorization and theoretical coursework—no, he couldn’t exactly claim he deserved better than he got on that. But the brewing itself? It always seemed like there was something preventing him from succeeding; Snape breathing down his neck with insults or Malfoy stirring up trouble. If it weren’t for the Slytherins, he thought he might have stood a fair chance.

He didn’t have any proof, though, and what did it matter, anyways? Harry sunk back into the armchair, letting the book settle on his chest and putting his feet up on the low table in front of him. Sure, Snape was horrible. Sirius claimed his dad had grown up and out of their bullying phase, but Snape, apparently, had grown up and into one. Was that their fault? Or was that just what Snape was bound to turn out like?

And what did it mean for Harry? If people who were bullied grew up to be bullies, did that mean every one of Snape’s Gryffindor students would turn out like he did? Even if Sirius was right about James, was Harry going to grow into bullying instead?

He shook his head and shifted in his chair, forcing himself to sit up and not sink any further into his dismally spiraling thoughts. It was the one time he had something worse than his Potions homework to think about, so he picked up the book again, flipping forward to the appropriate page, figuring he might as well get started on the pile Snape had assigned for the Holiday. He quickly realized he had no clue what it was talking about and flipped back to the beginning of the chapter, which he was supposed to have read earlier in the week, and began with that instead.

It was boring, and Harry had to read most everything twice to process it at all, but he wasn’t thinking about the memory. He was actually so focused that when Hermione returned to the common room, he didn’t notice her until she dropped a bag on the table in front of him.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he jumped.

“Homework.”

“Really?” She looked absolutely bewildered, blinking several times—it was the day before the Holiday started, after all, and normally she’d be hard pressed to get him to start before the last Sunday before class. She leaned over and peered down at his book. Harry resisted the urge to press it into his chest again so she couldn’t read it. “You’re doing your reading ahead of time. For potions.”

Harry shifted under her look, trying to reclaim the comfortable position he’d had before she interrupted him. It wasn’t like he could blame her for being skeptical, but she could very well see that was what he was doing and didn’t need to make an event of it. “I thought you were going to the library.”

“I was and I am. You could come with, if you’re doing homework.”

He shook his head, hoping it would make her go away faster. “I’m fine here, thanks.”

She studied him for a long moment, lips tight, and finally gave a stiff nod, jerking her hand towards the bag on the table. She didn’t make any effort to show him what was inside. “Well, I brought you these. But before I go back—Snuffles?”

“We talked.”

“And?”

“And what?”
“What did you figure out?”

He looked back down at his book. “It’s not important.”

“Harry, you risked expulsion. ‘Not important’?”

“You didn’t care this morning,” he grumbled. “Can’t you lay off? I needed to talk to him is all, and I did, and that’s it.”

Hermione snapped her hand back to her hip. “Oh. Glad to know it was worth it to go against my own judgment and spend my time helping you with something that was ‘not important’.” Her nostrils flared, and Harry got the impression that she was the one trying to keep her voice level. “You know what? I’m done. I’ve made enough excuses for you the last few days, and I’ve gotten yelled at, ignored, guilt tripped, pushed away—we have OWLs coming up and I have enough to worry about without trying to deal with you. Have fun revising by yourself, Harry. I’m done.”

Harry gaped, each of her words dropping on him like a sledgehammer striking his gut, but this was Hermione. Even when Ron had ignored him at the beginning of the Triwizard Tournament she had stood with him.

“Hermione,” he said before she could leave. “Look—it’s personal, okay. I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, what do you want to talk about, Harry, because you never—no. You know what? No. I’m going back to the library.”

“Hermione—”

“No. I said I’m done.”

For the second time in as many days, Harry was stuck staring at Hermione’s back as she stormed out of the common room. Lee Jordan, coming down from the dormitories to fetch something from the pile of experiments Harry was seated by, laughed. “Trouble in paradise, Harry?” he asked.

“Something like that,” Harry muttered, sinking back into the seat again. Lee snickered, carefully pulling the box he was retrieving from the middle of the stack. It sloshed as he moved it. Despite the wobbling, somehow the tower did not topple, and Lee quickly retreated back up the stairs.

Hermione had left her bag on the table. Harry scowled at it. Just more proof she’d gone out of her way to help him—not that he’d asked for it! He didn’t even know what was in there. He hooked the handles of the bag with one foot and pulled it towards him, leaning forward to peer inside once it was close enough.

Books. Of course it was books. It was Hermione, and she had been in the library. He sighed and pulled them out, the first covered in fading black cloth unmarked except for a silver lattice pattern around the edges and the letters “M.B.” stamped into the spine, the second a plain looking book titled *Succinct Secrets of Mental Mastery*, by Anant Anand.

Frowning, he pulled it into his lap, setting it atop the potions text. It had the soft corners and battered appearance of a book well-used, though flipping through the pages the dense text made Harry’s head swim. Hermione, never one to write directly in books, had nonetheless annotated certain sections with scraps of parchment tucked between pages, her cramped handwriting familiar from years of doing homework together.

Harry sighed, closing the book. Annotating it must have taken hours—and he’d only told her
yesterday his lie about studying occlumency on his own! She must have been working on it beforehand—but when? Hermione had the most gridlocked revisions schedule of anyone in the school. Another thing to thank her for later, if she was speaking to him again. If he was speaking to her.

As he stretched to put the book back in the bag, one of the little scraps of parchment fell out, fluttering to the floor. He set the book down and bent awkwardly until he could reach the note, snatching it up before it could slip between his fingers, his momentary triumph a quickly fading spark as he wondered what to do with it. He wouldn’t be able to tell where it came from to put it back where she’d intended it to be. He settled back into the armchair again, flipping over to read what she’d written:

_It doesn’t mean you aren’t to feel at all. It just means you set things aside and get on with protecting yourself. Just because you’re angry or confused or upset doesn’t mean life is going to come to a convenient standstill while you sort it out. You have to keep moving forward, no matter what memories pop up._

Harry stared at it until Hermione’s handwriting started to blur, and let his hand fall into his lap. Whatever it was referencing—clearing his mind, he assumed, since that was the only thing Snape had ever told him to do for occlumency—it hit a little too close to home.

The note crumpled beneath his fingers.

Was he becoming like Snape, or his father? His father or Snape? James had humiliated Snape in front of everyone, but Snape had called his mother—his defender—a mudblood. He looked down at his hand again, wondering where all his anger towards Hermione was coming from. She had done so much for him, and he…

Beneath his hand, the potions book seemed to mock him. He ground his teeth, tension snapping. Throwing the book out of his lap might have seemed to Harry the least violent expression of his frustration, but it very quickly proved to be a poor choice. There was nowhere for it to go but straight into the tower of experiments which, as they had the day before, crashed to the floor with a great burst of dust, this time swirling in silver clouds, reflecting every color in the room in the moments before Harry had to close his eyes to it. In his mouth it tasted slightly sweet, but it coated everything and made him choke with the sudden dryness of his throat. Around him, he could hear his housemates grumbling over their own sneezes and coughs. It wasn’t until he heard the laughter start that he opened his eyes again.

He was met with gray, as the dust coated his glasses. He swiftly scrubbed them clean with the fold of his robe and shoved them back on his face. Strangely, the sight that met him felt more like a Weasley family reunion than anything: everyone in the room, from Dean Thomas to Dennis Creevey, bore a smattering of freckles across their face and red hair atop their heads. It was a peculiar sight indeed, and, even more amusing, the laughter summoned the twins themselves, who looked down from the stairs onto their newly redhead peers in delight.

Harry stood, and use the sleeve of his robe to wipe a circle clean on the closest window. He couldn’t help but stare at the face reflected back at him. He looked… not like Harry Potter, that was certain. The freckles on his face were so dense he could hardly find his scar, and his black hair had lightened to a coppery red.

Laughter bubbled up in his gut, even as he felt Fred and George throwing their arms around his shoulders. He couldn’t stop, and soon they were laughing too, though probably more because of the uncanny resemblance between the three of them. Then Kenneth Towler the seventh-year prefect
came in through the portrait, and as his face went slack and his eyes grew wide everyone else started laughing again, and the twins released Harry as they rushed off to pester their less-liked dorm-mate.

Harry, regaining himself, tugged his robe off over his head, leaving him in jeans and a ratty t-shirt, and watched with fascination as more of the dust settled on his arms and the skin bloomed with freckles before meeting his own eyes in the window again. He didn’t look like James Potter. Maybe a bit more like Lily, with the red hair, but he didn’t mind that comparison so much. It was proof to him, something he knew he should have already understood but hadn’t: no matter how much he normally looked like his dad, he was irrevocably his own person. He would never do what his dad had done in Snape’s horrible memory, and he’d be damned if he grew up anything like the git Snape had become either. Not if he had anything to do with it.

Still, as he sobered some he had to accept that the facts remained: he had been terrible to Hermione, and she’d had every right to storm out on him as she had. He would have to make it up to her. He would go to the library and apologize—no, too soon. He would read the books, and…

He considered what else he could to as he retrieved his potions book and gathered the rest of his things to take upstairs. In truth, he wasn’t sure what more he could do than hope she would forgive him and try to stop losing his temper. He still wasn’t going to tell anyone what he’d seen in the pensieve. His own confusion and shame aside, it wasn’t his memory to share. That also ruled out explaining his conversation with Sirius and Lupin. As he’d told her, that was personal, and it had been her choice to teach the twins to activate the galleon.

That left only one of their recent arguments he could concede on: the D.A. Notes. Considering what she had just given him, finishing the Notes was the least he could do. Really, it would be creating more work for her, as Hermione would insist on going through and annotating them with external sources, and Harry wasn’t sure anyone would actually want them. But if it made Hermione happy, he would do it.

The main trouble was finding them. That morning Harry had shoved everything he’d indiscriminately thrown about his bed back into his trunk in one great heap. It was exactly how he had left it, and Harry grimaced at the mess. He set the bags and his robes on the bed and levitated the trunk up beside it. He would have to sort through it to find the right notebook. Hearing Dean and Seamus coming up the stairs, laughing about Dean’s bizarre new look, he settled himself on the covers, drew his bed curtains closed, and began to empty the trunk.

It was amazing how much stuff had accumulated over the past five years. Harry never left anything at the Dursleys, knowing either Petunia would throw it out or Dudley would destroy it, so he had five years of textbooks, quills, scrolls, clothes, gifts, odds and ends, and rubbish gathered. Near the top of the pile, just under a Weasley sweater, the sneakoscope was still shrieking, and Harry quickly fished out one of the mismatched socks Dobby had given him to stuff it in. He set it aside and started pulling out his extra clothing, which took up most of the space, folding it with the quick hands of a child who had done chores his whole life, building little stacks around him. His quidditch robes, the dress robes he had worn at the Yule Ball the year before, and Mrs. Weasley’s sweaters were the only among them he really valued. The rest were poorly fitting hand-me-downs he saved for summer chores and robes that were far too short for him now; his regular clothes were separated out into the dormitory closet with his school robes.

With the clothes sorted, Harry turned to the rest of the trunk. He needed to get the books into some sort of order, but first he would have to work through everything else. It would give Hermione time to cool down before he apologized, he supposed, and he still hadn’t found his notebook. Sighing, he gathered the unread stack of letters from the Triwizard Tournament.
Several of the envelopes only had his name on them, so they had to be opened to make sure they weren’t anything important. Mostly, they were filled with exactly what had stopped him reading them all in the first place: congratulations for winning (as they had just known he would do all along), demands that Harry write them personally explain exactly what had happened (even when they were complete strangers), requests to borrow his earnings (never mind that he had given them to Fred and George when the Diggorys had refused them), and so on.

It was a troublesome task, and Harry was soon itching to give up and toss the whole lot of them into the fire. But one envelope caught his eye. It was somehow different from the rest. The handwriting that displayed his name in capital letters seemed familiar, though he couldn’t place where he recognized it from, and like the book Hermione had brought him it had the worn appearance of something old: a flattened crease where it had once been folded, corners dented, the whole thing yellowed and faded. When he flipped it over, he found it sealed with an unstamped glob of what looked like candle wax, and in the corner a date: 23 June 1995.

Harry frowned. The final task had been on the 24th, so had this letter had been sent before he ‘won’ the tournament? Before Cedric had died, and Voldemort had been reborn? Impatience forgotten, he broke the seal, surprised by the little shock of magic up his arm that must have come from a sticking charm holding it together. He pulled out the letter inside, a single piece of parchment, and unfolded it.

It proved disappointing. The letter was illegible, between the messy handwriting, ink splatters, and what looked like water damage. He held it close to his face, squinting, but it seemed to be getting worse, letters jumbling and the ink swirling, and—

Harry swore and let go, scrambling back, staring at the page in horror. The words disappeared slowly, ink bleeding until they faded away, and he was terribly, horribly reminded of a similar sight: Tom Riddle’s diary, which had nearly killed Ginny Weasley in his second year. He grabbed his wand out of his robe pocket and trained it on the letter, expecting the worse.

The worst didn’t happen, though. Nothing did. Within a matter of seconds, the ink was completely gone, leaving behind a crisp, clean, and more importantly completely inanimate sheet of parchment. That did not stop Harry from staring, though, wand held like he expected the specter of Lord Voldemort’s youth to rise up out of the page. He was still sitting there on his bed, folded clothes settled around him, the faint whistling of the sneakoscope coming from the sock by his left knee. Everything but the letter seemed exactly the same.

In fact, Harry might not have noticed any sign of change at all had he not suddenly been thrown back in an explosion of white light.
A Few Screws Loose

Chapter by noaacat, thenoacat (noaacat)

Chapter Summary

Harry opens his eyes and finds himself - well, in the same place, actually, but time is an entirely different ballgame. Dumbledore, at least, is as confusing as ever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry blinked several times, trying to see past the bright spots dancing in front of his eyes. He felt a dull ache growing steadier in the crown of his head, and gingerly he prodded his fingers through his hair, wincing as they brushed a tender spot. What had happened? A force that he hadn’t seen—well, magic, probably—had flung him back into the headboard, his glasses flying off to who knows where, and beyond the light there was an overwhelming something that he couldn’t see, and he was slowly coming to realize that he should be raising his wand or shouting for help, but his thoughts were coming slow and fuzzy, like he was hearing the echoes of someone else speaking. Like hitting his head had knocked his brain loose, and all his thoughts were displaced and reaching him on delay. And there was that something—it was making his teeth buzz and ears ring and the hairs on the back of his arms stand up, and blast where was his wand—

Between the spots, he could make out the shadow of a figure approaching. It felt like a great, overwhelming giant of a beast—but that was ridiculous. Nothing too big could have fit through the door. It didn’t look big, or sound big, and there was something comforting about it. Familiar, almost. If it was a huge beast, it was like a giant teddy bear… or Hagrid… no, no, he could see it; it was tall and narrow and in no way as large as his brain wanted him to think.

Harry squinted. The bed curtains must have flown open with the magic that had knocked him back. As it shifted forward, the blurred colors began to distinguish themselves. There were bright yellow robes, the pale smudge of a wand arm raised, a long white beard…

“Professor?” Harry said, voice catching with his shock. “What are you doing here?”

Dumbledore—it had to be Dumbledore—stepped a bit closer—there was the shape of his face—laughing slightly. It wasn’t a particularly amused laugh. “Well, I am the headmaster,” he said. “I think I should turn the question around.”

Harry blinked some more and sat up quickly, ignoring the way the swimming spots got worse, and started patting around his bed for his glasses. He was definitely missing something. Dumbledore should not have been in the castle, his expulsion having been just a week ago. Of course, he might have been cleared; he was innocent of anything the Minister wanted to accuse him of, and he, at least, still had people who supported him. But no one had told Harry.

For some reason, the wave of resentment at being kept out of the know he would have felt any other
time was prematurely quashed by a doubt that had happened. He was being ridiculous, and he knew it, but normally he didn’t realize things like that until his foot was fully in his mouth. Well, there were more important things to worry about. There was no way the professor had gotten himself declared innocent so quickly... which meant Dumbledore was here when he was supposed to be on the run.

“Sir, I… aren’t you worried she is going to…”

But he trailed off. What could Umbridge possibly do that would worry Dumbledore, of all people?

“Here are your glasses, dear boy,” Dumbledore said kindly, the hand that had previously been branding a wand emerging through the blur and dangling the dark frames near Harry. “I’m afraid I may have been a bit hasty with that spell. You understand.”

Harry took them and shoved them on his face. Dumbledore took a few steps back from the bed, meeting the wide-eyed gaze that Harry fixed him with for several long moments, a polite smile on his face.

“Sir,” Harry said slowly. “You’re…”


“I know, sir, but I mean, you’re…”

It was Dumbledore, only it wasn’t; at least, not Dumbledore as Harry knew him. He was young, to begin with—no, not young at all. Just younger. His face was still lined with creases, but the smile lines and crow’s feet didn’t seem to run as deep. There was even a touch of color in his hair, a shock of red around the temples. He seemed particularly full of life—though maybe he was simply more restrained in Harry’s thoughts of him. No, no; he couldn’t imagine Dumbledore as restrained. But there was a difference. Perhaps it was just that this Dumbledore was a bit wand-happy, which went against everything the headmaster preached.

Harry realized he was still gaping and shut his mouth, blush rising on his neck. This was ridiculous. His head was still a bit fuzzy, he reasoned, and he hadn’t rightly had a conversation with the man all year. But Dumbledore really shouldn’t be at Hogwarts, what with his status as a fugitive, and what if one of the others came in? Dean and Seamus had been on their way up the stairs…

Harry glanced towards Seamus’s bed, just past Dumbledore’s elbow, and then his eyes were darting about, searching—but no matter where he looked, beyond his own bed strewn with items from his trunk, it was empty. Only the beds and wardrobes—and only four of each of those, not five—remained; gone was the sweater Seamus had left hanging over his bedpost to dry, and the drawing of the Hungarian Horntail Dean had drawn the year was no longer spellotaped to the wall above his likewise absent Arsenal Football poster. Nor was Neville’s mimbulus mimbletonia sitting squat in the narrow window, nor Ron’s Chudley Cannons gear strewn about his section of the room.

He looked back to Dumbledore and those two little bits of reddish hair framing his sharp blue eyes, mouth falling open in wonder. “Is this a memory?”

“Ah!” said Dumbledore, and at Harry’s question he seemed to relax a bit. He still had his wand in hand, though. “Alas, but we are interacting, are we not?”

“Oh, right,” said Harry, frown. He glanced down at the blank piece of parchment, the comparison to Tom Riddle’s diary rekindling unease in his gut, and pressed his fingers into the rough fabric of his jeans. No, this was definitely reality, not a memory. “Then what…”
“You may find it informative to know that today is the seventeenth of July, nineteen seventy-five.”

It took a few moments before Harry’s hands came to an abrupt halt. “Did you say seventy-five?”

“Indeed.”

“But that’s not possible!” Harry exclaimed. But then he paused and thought about it. If he were here, and it really was the day Dumbledore said it was, then that mean time travel. He didn’t know enough to really exclude that, but Hermione’s time turner back in third year had already upset his understanding of the world once. “...is it?”

Dumbledore spread his hands, gesturing about the tower. “Here we are.”

“I guess,” Harry said uncertainly. “Sorry, sir. I’m Harry—”

He was cut off by a swiftly wave. “Please, my boy, do not tell me anything unnecessary. Not just yet.”

“Oh, um. Sorry, sir. But… why?”

Dumbledore considered him, took a few steps across the room, and sat down on Ron’s bed. Well, apparently it wasn’t Ron’s bed just yet, but he wouldn’t know whose it actually was, at this point. Nineteen seventy-five. Seventy-five. Harry shouldn’t even be alive yet! He wasn’t certain when his parents were married, but he’d not been born until nineteen eighty. His mind reeled at the thought, and white spots started swimming before his eyes again, that overwhelming something—extremely powerful time travel magic, maybe?—but Dumbledore drew him back in.

“If I am correct in assuming you have just arrived from what is presently the future, then you must be very careful,” the headmaster advised. “You see, between here and whenever you are from—no, don’t tell me, that is key—along the way there are infinite possibilities of how time might play out, but only one path will lead to the exact moment in time you came from. Do you understand?”

Harry rubbed his forehead. “Paths? Sir?”

Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully, stroking a hand through his beard. After a moment he withdrew his wand from his robes, and with another display of that strangely vibrant magic he conjured up five orbs of light to float in the air before him. “Imagine if one day you won a free trip to anywhere in the world, a full week’s holiday, all expenses paid, no costs to you.”

Harry opened his mouth, closed it, and stared at Dumbledore. Was this really… well, it was Dumbledore. He was brilliant; there had to be a way this related. “...okay.”

“So you have to make a choice. Where would you go? Please—name three places.”

“Uh,” said Harry, mind suddenly empty of any place names. “Paris… Egypt? Brazil?”

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore. He looked incredibly pleased, for whatever reason. In face, the longer Dumbledore went on the more Harry had to remind himself that he was in nineteen seventy-five and that was probably more concerning than the man’s eccentricities. The headmaster, of course, went on. “Imagine you choose to go to Egypt. A day after you arrive, where will you be?”

Harry scoured the question for a trick. “Egypt?”

“Of course. Now, imagine instead you had chosen to go to Brazil. Where would you be after a day then?”
“...Brazil.”

“Yes. So you see, same time, but two very different results. It all depends on that choice.”

It was official: Harry had a headache that wasn’t just from the sore spot on his head. The tower seemed to echo with his unvoiced groans. “Sorry, sir; how exactly does this have anything to do with time travel?”

Dumbledore frowned. “Isn’t it clear enough?”

“Um, maybe? Sir? I’m kind of stuck on the fact that I have apparently travelled through time.”

“A truly commiserable situation, my boy,” Dumbledore said. He at least sounded sympathetic, but he charged on anyway. “Perhaps, then, consider this. Imagine, in your week abroad, you meet someone, and fall head over heels in love. You went to Paris, in this version, after all.”

Harry sighed, resigned. Maybe he hadn’t somehow traveled back in time, maybe he was just stuck in a bad dream of Dumbledore speaking in riddles. It wasn’t that out of the ordinary, Dumbledore riddling—though mostly his dreams were stuck on the Department of Mysteries or bad memories, so this would be a new sort of torment. If it was from Voldemort, well, the Dark Wizard certainly had a peculiar sense of humor. “Okay,” he said, as evenly as he could manage.

“Now say, at the end of this week, the love of your life suddenly finds themselves back in time, and in your proximity when you had just found out you had won the trip.”

Harry looked up. This ‘example’ actually featured time travel? “Go on.”

“So your love is there, and knows that you two met because you chose to go to Paris. What, then, do they consider the optimal choice for you to make?”

“To go to Paris?”

“Yes! So anything your love does while stuck in the past, they must not upset you from making that choice. Otherwise, they might return to the present and find you chose to travel to Brazil instead, and you never met, and you never fell in love.”

“Right,” Harry said. He had actually followed Dumbledore’s line of reasoning this time. But… “Er, what was the point of this, uh, explanation? Sir?”

Dumbledore’s cheerful countenance suddenly turned grave. “Whatever information you give me, my boy, I may use against you, unwittingly or not. If, for example, you were to kill someone while you were in this past—forgive the example; it is just that—if you were to kill someone in the past then in the future I might endeavor to prevent you from travelling back in time at all, to prevent the crime. As you have obviously not been prevented, that would put the future you came from at risk.”

Harry blinked, but in the back of his mind the memory of Hermione explaining her time turner had wormed it’s way forward. “Oh,” he said blandly. “You’re trying to say—I have to make sure I don’t prevent myself from existing.”

Dumbledore ran a hand through his beard, frowning. “Well, I suppose that’s possible,” he allowed. “If your presence was to lead to your parents never meeting, for example, or prevent their relationship from unfolding in the way that lead to your birth… yes, that would be a way to put it.”

Screw Dumbledore’s example, discussing it directly made much more sense “And if I told you something, and you reacted to it in a way you hadn’t, uh, when I’m from—is that how I say it? You
might do something that disrupted their relationship, too.”

“Precisely. But it is not just the potential of your birth I worry about. You must be very careful what you tell me. I’m afraid that times being as they are, every bit of information is suspect. You might mention something—someone in power who I would not want, for example, who I might then focus my attentions to keep out of power, and that would surely shape your life and the lives of everyone around you to be different from how you know it to have been.”

“Right,” said Harry. “Nineteen seventy-five. That’s… there’s…”

Now that Dumbledore had explained, he wasn’t sure what he could say. Dumbledore, however, filled in for him: “There is a war brewing.”

Harry barely remembered not to nod. Granted, Dumbledore sounded like he knew the upcoming turmoil as a certainty, but Harry did not know his history well enough to know what Voldemort’s current state of power was. Binns had never given them a history of the first war, and while Hermione had probably read everything there was to read on the subject, all Harry really knew was that his parents had fought as part of the Order of the Phoenix, and the handful of stories Sirius and Remus had told him about them. His parents, who had to be alive at this point—he didn’t know how old they were, really; had never known their birthdays, since they had died so young…

“Hang on,” Harry said. “Sir, I could—if I gave you information, it could shape the outcome of… of everything! If you knew what is going to happen, you’d be able to change things.”

Dumbledore smiled at him again, but it did not meet his eyes. “Whatever information you gave to me, it certainly could end up shaping the world. But would you risk it? Everything you know, everyone you love? Perhaps you have yet to realize, my boy, but our existence is a precarious as a knife balanced on a thread. The slightest slip, and…”

That, Harry thought, had to be the single more pessimistic thing he’d ever heard Dumbledore say. He much preferred Dumbledore as he knew him—even avoiding Harry as he had been for months and only giving advice like ‘you will come to understand’.

“No,” Harry said. “I… guess not.”

“Well, we are at an understanding, then,” Dumbledore said, clapping his hands against his knees. “The important thing is for you to avoid upsetting the path the world would follow without you here, and to find your way back to the time you came from before too much damage is done.”

“Too much damage?” Harry echoed.

“Well, there is no way to entirely avoid affecting the world!” Dumbledore’s voice was almost painfully cheerful, though he still had a calmer, almost wry expression, eyes still sharp as he watched Harry. “Take myself—I had been heading out for tea with Bathilda Bagshot, out in Godric’s Hollow, you know. Instead, I find myself here, responding to an intrusion to the wards. Perhaps Bathilda was planning on poisoning me, and my life has just been saved! But now we shall never know what may have been, for this had become reality.”

“Right,” said Harry slowly. “I, uh, doubt that she was, sir.”

“Perhaps. But she is the writer of Hogwarts, a History. Have you read it?”

“Her—a friend had. She used to quote it all the time.”

“Well, I might have passed onto Bathilda some tidbit, which could have ended up in the next edition,
and your friend might have read it, and told you—you won’t know until you find your memories don’t quite align.”

Harry, surprisingly enough, had yet to burst with irritation, but he felt rather like he imagined his Aunt Marge must have when he accidentally inflated her three summers ago. “So? How do I get back, sir?”

“Back?”

“To… the future. Home.”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore. “I was afraid we would come to that.”

Harry, remembering how Dumbledore had said very nearly the same thing when Fudge had tried to arrest him Monday, hung his head. “I can’t go back?”

“Of course you can!” Dumbledore exclaimed. “Probably. There is an extremely high probability that there is a possibility you can return happily to your time.”

“What? Then why did you say…”

“Say what?”

“Never mind,” Harry said quickly. One of them had to stick to the point, and Dumbledore didn’t seem inclined to. “So? How?”

“I haven’t the slightest,” Dumbledore said.

“You haven’t…”

“The slightest. I’m afraid time magic is rather outside my area of expertise, as it were. I haven’t devoted—pardon the phrase—any time to it. Well, except once, but that taught me only the folly of my pursuit. So I really can’t claim to know anything on the topic.”

“But you’re Dumbledore!” Harry exclaimed. “Er. Professor Dumbledore.”

“Well, I am only one man, my dear boy. And I dare say I know a good deal about other subjects. Did you know, there are twelve key uses—”

“For dragon’s blood, yes, but I need to know about time travel,” Harry insisted, cutting the man off. “Sir, if you don’t know, then… what am I supposed to do? You said yourself I need to find my way back as quickly as possible.”

“Yes.” Dumbledore stood, shaking out his robes. “Well, first, barring any information that may disrupt the flow of time, you should explain to me in as much detail as possible how you found yourself here.”

Harry blinked and looked down at the mess of his trunk strewn about the bed. He quickly ran through what had happened, editing it as best he could before speaking. “Well, I was sitting here on my bed, sorting through my trunk, and I was reading—”

Dumbledore raised a hand, halting him again. “Was there anyone else with you? You mentioned a ‘she’, before.”

Had he? Harry didn’t remember that. “I don’t think so—I mean, I’d heard some of the others coming up the stairs, but that was before I closed the curtains, and… a while ago. They probably just popped
in and left again. I don’t think anyone else was around.”

Dumbledore nodded, and Harry went on.

“Right. So, um. Sorting through my trunk… I had these letters, from—well, I thought most of it was junk to throw away, right, but one seemed a little strange, so I opened it.” He glanced at the piece of parchment sitting on the bed, and moved to levitate it, wary of touching it directly, only to realize that he was still without wand. He looked around. “My wand—where’s my—”

“Apologies,” said Dumbledore, procuring it from somewhere and passing it back. “I had quite forgotten that I had disarmed you.”

Relieved, Harry snatched it back. A jolt went up his arm as he grabbed it, and Harry nearly let go again—it seemed his wand was as unimpressed by the unexpected time travel as Harry was. He frowned as he felt it sort of… settle into his hand. It was strange. There was nothing particularly off about it, it just seemed to… buzz. No, that wasn’t the word, it was just—he was probably imagining things. His head still felt strange and empty, anyways. He turned his attention on levitating the parchment over towards Dumbledore. The headmaster quickly got the idea, and Harry could almost feel his magic being brushed gently aside as the man took over.

“This is the letter?” Dumbledore asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I mean—it had writing on it, when I first opened it. But I couldn’t read it at all. I mean, because it was illegible, at first, and then the ink started to disappear.”

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully, and with a few deceptively simple flicks of his wand the sheet of parchment was surrounded by a ball of magic. It didn’t glow or anything; visibly the parchment remained unchanged, no matter how many spells the headmaster cast. But the space around it seemed charged with energy that shifted slightly as he waved his wand.

“And then?” Dumbledore prompted.

Harry started. He wondered if he had a concussion from hitting his head, or something; he’d become so transfixed watching Dumbledore cast for a moment he’d forgotten all about explaining.

“Ant then it ended up completely blank, but nothing seemed to have happened. And then I was hit by a—a white light, and thrown back into the headboard, and then you showed up.”

“Reverse that. Or, invert it. I was the cause, the ‘white light’ was the effect.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Right. That’s it, though. That’s what happened.”

“Don’t forget the obvious,” Dumbledore advised. At last he tucked his wand away again, and reached forward to pluck the parchment from the air. “Often, the simplest explanation is the right one.”

“So…” Harry glanced at the parchment, reviewing his story. “Then, that has some sort of spell on it to cause time travel, sir?”

“Oh, no.” The Headmaster laughed. He offered Harry the parchment, and Harry took it, trusting that Dumbledore wouldn’t hand him anything dangerous—which was probably a misplaced trust, but he was having trouble thinking straight. “This is just an ordinary piece of parchment. Actually, if you hadn’t told me it was a letter, I never would have known.”

“Well, the ink vanished,” Harry repeated peevishly.
“So you’ve said. And yet, even had it not, normally a letter has some residual magic on it from the 
delivery. Have you ever wondered how an owl delivers mail?”

No, Harry was tempted to snarl, but he managed to offer a polite, “How, sir?”, which was a 
remarkable bit of restraint, considering he’d lost count of how many times he’d lost his temper in the 
last week. Why had he been so intent on talking to Dumbledore before? The man never gave straight 
answers. All he wanted to know about was time travel. Not hypothetical trips to Paris. Not his plans 
for tea with Bathilda-whoever. And certainly not mail delivery.

“It’s a matter of intent. When you write a letter, you are in fact imbuing it with a magic that owls can 
sense. In a way, you are willing it to reach its recipient, and the owl acts on your will. An owl 
doesn’t need an address, because it can follow the writer’s intent and reach the desired outcome— 
unless, of course, there are owl wards. Or if you were to write a letter but mistakenly seal it in an 
envelope intended for someone else... But those digressions we will have to bypass, I am afraid.”

“Right,” said Harry, not ‘afraid’ of avoiding digression at all.

“That piece of parchment has no residual magic on it. None at all. Even a muggle writing would 
imbue it with some magic of intent. Whatever happened that took the ink off the page also removed 
any trace of magic it ever had.”

Harry looked at the parchment in his hand, which, as Dumbledore had said, really was quite 
ordinary. “So... it didn’t send me back in time, then?”

“Well, I can’t say that.”

“But you just said—”

“There is not, at this point in time, any sort of spell on that parchment, time-based or otherwise. 
Whether there has been or will be—which, in matters of time travel, are essentially the same thing—I 
cannot say.”

Harry placed the parchment down on the bed. It was that or tear it up, and Dumbledore hadn’t said 
anything suggesting he wouldn’t need it. “So. If not that, how do we find out how I was, uh, sent 
here, sir? And more importantly, how do I get back to—”

“Harry. Remember, you can’t tell anyone that you have travelled through time. Not everyone would 
care about maintaining a future you can get back to. I—I will have to take a memory-dampening 
potion, when you are gone, or else seal them away, but if you mention to anyone—”


Dumbledore frowned. “Well, I dare say it will require a bit of research.”

“Research?”

“Yes. If you will accompany me to the library…”

Harry sighed. ‘Going to the library’ sounded like what Hermione would do while he and Ron 
dawdled about waiting for her to reappear with the answers to all their questions. Why hadn’t 
Hermione been the one sent back? She would probably have dragged Dumbledore off to the library 
the second she’d seen him, not wasted time with bizarre conversation, and would have a plan of 
action, and know what Dumbledore meant by ‘a bit of research’.

Well, at least the errant headmaster and Harry were finally getting somewhere. He hoped.
Empty as it was, Hogwarts echoed with every transgression against its silence. It was unsettling to walk through the common room without at least the crackle of the fire, and there almost seemed to be a ghost of the low conversation and burst of laughter that filled it during the school year. The hearth was empty. Fred and George’s heaps of experiments were missing. The couches and arm chairs, mostly the same as the ones he was familiar with, had all been pushed to the walls, and most of the portraits that lined the room showed only backgrounds, their occupants having gone on holiday with the rest of the school. Harry had never realized how big the common room really was beneath all the usual clutter—the Dursley’s whole house could have practically fit inside. Without the other students and their forgotten possessions, it was strangely imposing.

He was glad to exit the portrait hole for the moving staircases, where there were several paintings still occupied with subjects all eager to gossip on Harry’s unexplained presence. He didn’t like their staring—he could feel their eyes on him even as he tried to look away—so he hunched his shoulders and tried to keep pace with Dumbledore. There were a few near misses with the stairs; Dumbledore was a good foot taller than him and had a quickness to his step Harry didn’t remember, and he seemed to know exactly which staircase was going where even before they started moving.

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to help you much, my boy,” the Headmaster was explaining as he led the way to the library. “If we wish to maintain your timeline, then it follows that I must behave as I would have had you not arrived. The only time we may interact is if I have, you might say, time to spare. And I find myself rather busy, these days…”

“But—I don’t know anything about time travel,” Harry said, flustered. “I wouldn’t even know where to look, to research it.”

“I can help you there.”

They came to a half, and Dumbledore tapped the knob of the library door. It creaked open. Harry had never realized the library door creaked. That seemed like something Madam Pince, the librarian who thought it a felony to speak over a whisper, would have had fixed…

Harry frowned. Plenty of the doors in the castle creaked. Why did this one bother him so much? But he was quickly distracted as the lamps flickered on one by one, and then Dumbledore, with a deceptively casual sweep of his hand, had books soaring their way from several directions at once. Harry, hurrying again to catch up to Dumbledore, very narrowly ducked out of the way of one coming from behind him.

Straightening up, he watched as the books sorted themselves into a stack floating towards the library’s largest table. There were so many (did Dumbledore really expect him to look at all of those?) and he couldn’t help but admire the sheer magic of it. It was only levitation—but it was complicated levitation. Harry had levitated books himself, when he was feeling particularly lazy and hadn’t wanted to walk across the dorm. But this—it was as though Dumbledore had an idea in mind, and with no more than a wave of his hand was translating the idea into reality. It was graceful, efficient magic, and he made it look so easy. Harry wasn’t sure he would have been able to hold two separate books in the air at once, let alone that many, let alone while somehow getting them organized. And Dumbledore wasn’t even using his wand! If he had, maybe Harry wouldn’t have noticed, but frankly he found this display ridiculous.

Dumbledore, at least, seemed entirely comfortable with what he was doing, and gave Harry a knowing smile as he turned around, the stack settling on the table with a heavy thunk. Harry quickly picked up the book at the top, his neck heating. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t known Dumbledore was… unspeakably proficient at magic. He’d seen the Professor conjure hundreds of sleeping bags at once, and move the huge tables in the Great Hall like it was nothing—he’d even been present when
Dumbledore faced down Fudge, Umbridge, and multiple aurors without looking the least bit nervous. Harry hadn’t batted an eye at that.

Like his magic, Dumbledore’s approach to research seemed to fall firmly in the ‘overkill’ department. There were at least fifteen books of various thicknesses, decorations, and apparent ages, enough look like one of Hermione’s feverous research sprees. Only, no Hermione. The thought of doing this research without her and Ron—just another reason to hurry back to the nineties, he supposed.

“It’s a start,” Dumbledore said, glancing over the stack he had amassed. “I’ve only read the top few myself, so whether or not they will prove of any use… But I’ll write the librarian, when I have a spare moment. She would know better than I where to look—I do believe she has read most of our collection.”

He made that sound like a particularly admirable trait, but Harry, glancing around to the shelves filled with… there had to be a hundred thousand books, at least—he found the thought dismal.

“In any case,” the Headmaster continued. “There is a chance the answers you seek can be found even in this small collection.”

“A chance,” Harry echoed dully, but Dumbledore was pulling a small gold pocket watch from his marigold-patterned robes.

“A chance… yes… dear me.” Dumbledore’s expression shifted into a troubled frown. He snapped the watch shut and gave Harry a sharp look. “I’m afraid I have to run—I’ve tarried here beyond what I should have. I don’t expect I will be returning this evening. You know your way about the castle? Yes, yes, of course… oh! Hani!”

Harry stared as the man clapped his hands together—honey? But then he nearly fell over with shock when with a small ‘pop’ and a nasty twisting feeling a house elf appeared, curtseying to Dumbledore with the bronze pillowcase she wore.

The professor was already making his way towards the door. “Harry, this is Hani. She’s recently been passed on to us here at Hogwarts. Hani, Harry will be saying with us for a time. Make sure he gets whatever he might need!”

“Er, Professor—”

But Dumbledore was out of the library and out of sight, and when Harry stuck his head out the door, the Headmaster was gone.

Harry turned back to the house elf. She was standing by the table, looking up at him with wide green eyes that inevitably reminded him of Dobby. Only, unlike Dobby would ever do, she was waiting in complete silence.

“Um,” he said, taking a few halting steps closer. “Hi. I’m, er, Harry.”

She nodded. On closer inspection, Harry thought she seemed more like Winky than Dobby. Winky had come to Hogwarts after Mr. Crouch had released her from his service, the worst possible fate for an elf, and she’d been a mess—constantly drunk on butterbeer, and always on the verge of or in the midst of an emotional fit. Hani wasn’t drunk, but she did have a nervous droop in her ears and an otherwise rigid posture that made her look ready to fling herself on the floor and start sobbing.

“Er,” he said again, not knowing what to say, and not wanting to leave her standing there staring at him while he looked at the books. “Dinner might be nice? In a few hours?”
The elf nodded again, and curtsied, and Harry pulled out a chair from the table to sit down. For a moment, Hani continued to stand there, as though she wanted to say something. But she was silent, and as soon as Harry started to turn towards her he was hit by shock again, like a punch to the gut. She had disappeared as suddenly as she had arrived.

Shaking his head, Harry picked up the book at the top of the stack and, after grimacing at the uneven and densely printed text, flipped to the first chapter and began to read. It took him a sentence to realize the book had to be terribly old, as the English was stilted, to say the least. It took a paragraph to conclude that Dumbledore, with his obscure analogies, must have loved reading it. After a page, Harry realized he had no clue what any of what he had just read meant and had to start over. After fifteen pages, he was completely certain that what he was reading had absolutely nothing to do with time travel, and more to do with ridiculing other authors’ ideas of death.

Frustrated, Harry returned to the front of the book, but found no index, then turned to the back, but found no glossary. He idly flipped through the pages, skimming the section titles, and very nearly missed M. Karlsson’s Peculiar Trans-Dimensional Theory of Time. The section seemed to propose that by travelling back in time, a wizard could prevent a death by removing the victim from the time which they were fated to die and bring them forward to the point where they were already dead, which if possible would prove the existence of multiple dimensions, as a single person could not have died and have not died at the same time.

Harry turned the page, hoping to find an explanation of how the wizard hoped to travel through time. Instead he found a new section, which seemed to be discussing Shakespeare and the Draught of Living Death.

Harry fumed. A single page? He had wasted that much time on the book for a single page? Maybe—he licked his thumb and pinched the corner of the page, squeezing and pushing in case two had stuck together—nothing. Harry glared down at the black text and read the three scant paragraphs again, but he found nothing of used, nothing about Karlsson proposed to test his theory. In fact, in the footnotes the author asserted that Karlsson was ‘a flobber minded quack’ who had ‘lost his wit to liquors brewed by like-minded empiricks’, which was an insult Harry half intended to save for use on Dumbledore, though he didn’t have the patience to parse out what it meant.

The footnote did at least point to another book, which Harry identified as the next in Dumbledore’s stack. Rather than jump headfirst into that (he was fairly certain the ordering made sense to Dumbledore but would be of no use to him) he spread the books across the table. Four appeared to be hand-written accounts in a script that Harry did not waste more time deciphering, and he put them aside, along with Curious & Artefacts of Roman Origins, From the Fables of the Finns, and a book that seemed to be printed entirely in runes, which Harry had no hope of being able to translate.

Among those left, one seemed promising: An Extended History of Time and Other Subtle Changes. Quick inspection revealed it was printed in the 60s, which meant it was recent, unlike the heavy, leather-bound tomes that smelled of mold and made his arms prickle with goosebumps when he touched them. It also came with an introduction, which was written in comparatively plain—or at least comprehensible—English and clearly laid out it’s purpose, which was exactly what Harry needed in a book. He imagined Dumbledore must have hated this one: it was far too direct. That thought cheered him up somewhat, and Harry read through the ten pages of introduction in record time.

His focus was disturbed by the library door creaking shut. The sound sent a shudder down his spine and he leapt up with fright, only to his his knee on the heavy table, topple the chair he had been sitting on, and, balance lost to a spell of dizziness and the wave of pain, collapse into a pathetic heap on the floor. His vision was going spotty again, and for a moment his ears rang with the silence of the
“Master Harry?” a small voice said, cutting through the imagined noise and making Harry start again, this time hitting his arm on a sharp corner of the chair.

Eyes stinging, he looked up to find Hani the house elf looking down at him with very wide eyes. “Is Master Harry being well?” she asked hesitantly.

“Um. Hi, Hani.” Harry untangled his legs from the chair and sat up slowly. “I think I hit my head again. Or maybe I did get a concussion earlier. Everything’s very… fuzzy feeling. Is that a concussion?”

Hani stared at him, then bustled forward. “Master Harry bes staying still,” she warned him, and then her little hand touched a tender spot on his head and he felt a rush of pain mixed with magic, and his head whirled.

A moment—he wasn’t sure precisely how long, but—later, he came to his senses and found Hani squinting at him. His head, he managed to realize, wasn’t hurting at all, and his vision was spot-free. It just seemed like his brain was having trouble remembering to process what he was seeing.

“Master Harry should be taking better care of himself,” Hani said, sounding almost reproachful. Harry winced. She reminded him of Mrs. Weasley, who he’d seen scold her sons for their reckless behavior hundreds of times.

“I’ve been told,” he said. He shook his head, trying to remember what he was doing before he embarrassed himself further. “Did you need something?”

“Is Master Harry wanting his supper?”

Harry blinked. He had forgotten about that.

“I probably should… what time is it?”

“Presently nine o’clock, Master Harry.”

He wasn’t sure what time he had arrived, but it couldn’t have been past six when he’d been sent forward in time, maybe earlier, and he assumed he’d arrived at the same time that he had left. He stood, righted the chair, and gave the books on the table a disparaging look. He’d made so little progress…

Hani led the way out of the library, the door creaking horribly to allow their exit. The walk was only eventful in that every time a torch or lamp lit up to guide their path Harry jumped, his attention drawn to the light like a high-strung cat, which started to get tedious after about ten steps. He was distracted enough he didn’t even notice where they were going until they had arrived at a familiar painting of a fruit bowl and Harry stood on tiptoes to tickle the pear.

The kitchens were oddly quiet without Dobby, and there were hardly any elves in sight. The room was unlit save for the fire in the huge hearth at the end (Winky and her collection of butterbeer bottles conspicuously missing), and Hani led him to the end of one of the four tables closest to the fire, where a place had been set with a bowl of soup, some bread, ham, string beans, mashed potatoes, and even pumpkin juice. It was far too much food for one person, and he ate slowly, watching as Hani went to help another elf wash dishes in an unnecessarily complicated dance of levitation, soap bubbles, drying charms, and three rinses.

Eventually, Hani looked back over her shoulder and caught him yawning, food forgotten, and
hurried back over. “Master Harry is needing to sleep,” she observed.

The prospect of going back to the empty tower was only slightly less miserable than the thought of the library, but before he could make up his mind either way, he yawned. She was probably right. He didn’t think he had the energy left to focus any longer. “Yeah, okay,” he agreed, standing slowly from the table. “Could you make sure no one puts away the books I was using?”

“Elves don’t usually be going into the library, Master Harry.”

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The next afternoon, Dumbledore returned to the library to find Harry slumped in his seat and thumping his head repeatedly against the table. At least this time Harry didn’t topple over at the sound of the door creaking.

“Not going well?” the Professor asked kindly. Harry sat up, feeling a flush creeping down the back of his neck.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he admitted after a moment.

It was a statement that applied not only to the research, but to his entire situation. The night before, he’d made it up to Gryffindor tower before he realized he did not know the password. The Fat Lady was missing from her portrait, anyways, so he’d had to make the trip all the way back to the kitchen to ask Hani what to do, though as they made the trip back up to the tower she cautiously informed him he could summon her by simply calling her name. With a bit of work, she managed to take the empty portrait off the wall and set it down beside the empty doorway behind it, bowing low to Harry as she gestured for him to enter. Harry had stumbled wearily through the empty tower tower, only to discover that not only were the contents of his trunk still in piles around his bed, but his section of the wardrobe was empty. It was only what had been on the bed with him that had arrived in nineteen seventy-five.

Worse, after he had moved the piles of clothes back into the trunk and changed into some of Dudley’s worst cast-offs, he thought to check the Marauder’s Map for the password, only to discover that it and the Invisibility Cloak were missing from his bag. He’d panicked, digging through his trunk again, but it wasn’t in there. Maybe he had taken them out when he had put his bag on the bed…? But where would he have put them? Sirius’s knife was still there, tucked away beneath his transfiguration notes. And all the rest of what he remembered being in the trunk—and a few things he didn’t—were still there.

He’d called Hani, Hitting his head on the bed frame when she appeared soundlessly behind him, but the elf assured Harry that no one besides Harry and Dumbledore had been in the castle that day, and Dumbledore had left the grounds directly after he exited the library.

Eventually he’d had to accept that the items were missing, and as he was too exhausted to think of any solutions he had settled down to sleep, pulling the bed curtains closed so he could pretend he wasn’t as alone in the echoing, vaulted room as he really was, but he had tossed and turned for hours. The building itself seemed to be vibrating with energy around him—no matter how he tried to clear his mind, he couldn’t stop himself from mentally tracing the architecture, the placement of the portraits and the fireplace in the common room, and beyond. The bed curtains, normally a useful tool to block out Neville’s snoring, seemed to become a frighteningly close set of walls around him the
longer he lay awake. Harry had never been claustrophobic before; having slept in a cupboard for years, he generally found small spaces comfortable rather than confining. But at last he’d had to tear the curtains open again to get them off his mind—and then he could hear the tower echoing even louder than before.

When he *had* managed to fall asleep, however, he’d slept better than he had in ages. Voldemort, wherever he was in nineteen seventy-five, was not concerned with the Department of Mysteries, it seemed.

He worked to find Hani lingering in the doorway. When he groggily greeted her (*Wazzit, Ron—?*) she informed him she would have breakfast ready when he came downstairs. It took him several minutes to remember *when* he was, a realization which was enough to get him out of bed and hurrying towards the bathroom—and if not for his quick reflexes, he would have fallen and hit his head yet again when he caught sight of himself in the mirror across from the doorway. Apparently Fred and George’s experiment, which he’d all but forgotten about, had not yet worn off: staring back at him was a heavily freckled redhead. His wide green eyes and familiar glasses were the only recognizable parts. No matter how he scrubbed at himself with the remnants of a bar of soap someone had left in the shower, the freckles remained, and even a *finite incantatem* didn’t do anything for him. He supposed he was stuck like this, for now.

In the kitchen, he’d been greeted by another impossibly large meal. He’d stuffed himself to the brim trying not to waste any of the house elves’ hard work. It was nearly ten by the time he’d made it up to the library, where he faced the piles of books with a growing sense of doom.

Dumbledore, observing the misery written on Harry’s face, chuckled. “Well, you are researching a topic I can only assume you know little about,” he said. “If it were not difficult, it would not be worth studying!”

“If it weren’t so difficult, I’d be home by now,” Harry grumbled. More and more he was wishing he had Hermione there with him. She would have known exactly where to look to find the answers Harry needed. As it was, he didn’t even know what questions to ask, since ‘how do you travel forward in time twenty years’ didn’t seem to be an option.

More than that, he wished Ron was there, too. He wouldn’t have been any better off on the research front, but at least Ron would be able to commiserate with his frustrations. Between the three of them, they might have found their way back, but on his own…

“Well, you can tell me about what you have learned so far over a spot of dinner, my boy.”

“Dinner?” Harry said curiously, glancing around to try and locate the clock he knew had to be somewhere—there, on the shelf behind the librarian’s seat. He hadn’t realized it had gotten so late. “Hang on—sorry, sir, but didn’t you say you wouldn’t be seeing much of me? To avoid upsetting things?”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore agreed, tilting his head down to examine Harry over the top of his glasses. “It just so happened I needed a book myself, and on my walk down dear Hani accosted me. She’s worked herself into a state, you might have realized, since you sent her away and never ate lunch.”

Harry frowned, watching as Dumbledore went around the librarian’s desk and retrieved a book off the shelf behind it. He supposed he *had* rejected her offer of lunch, but he didn’t think that was any reason for concern. In fact, he’d hardly noticed he was doing it, as he’d been buried in a legend of an ancient Chinese device that sounded an awful lot like a time turner but had no ‘modern’ descendant.

“I didn’t mean to upset her,” he said. “And I guess I should have dinner, if it really is this late. I
didn’t realize. But should you be there, sir?”

“I see no reason why I would not normally eat dinner today. Whether or not you are there will hopefully not upset the outcome of that task too much.”

“Well, you are researching time travel, after all,” Dumbledore pointed out. “If anyone succeeded, they wouldn’t be around to finish their tale.”

“Alright,” Harry said. He looked down at his book, hoping he could find his place again, and set it aside, following Dumbledore out of the library with a glare for the creaking door.

“How much have you read so far?” the Headmaster asked when they were settled in the kitchens, tucking into two fresh pot pies. “You seemed rather stuck when I arrived.”

“It’s hard to focus,” Harry said, trying not to sound like he was complaining. It really was. That morning, somewhat more awake than he’d been the night before, he had found it hard to ignore the thousands of books on the shelves around him, each screaming for attention because for all he knew the key to getting back could be hidden in any one of them.

“I was reading—it’s called *An Extended History of Time and*, um… *Subtle Things? Changes?* I think that’s it.” He chewed the end of his fork thoughtfully, and Dumbledore had to wave to urge him to go on. “But then I kept having to go find other books it referenced, and only half those I could find, and none of them got me anywhere. And there was a bit that needs to be translated from Latin, but I’m really hoping I don’t have to do that… I always get bad marks on my Latin. Anyways, half of what the book is saying is that there is no actual list of spells or things to use to travel through time. It’s just a bunch of stories and rumors. And then some of the first hand accounts—I found one that actually sounded halfway believable, but it cut off with no end…”

“Well, you are researching time travel, after all,” Dumbledore pointed out. “If anyone succeeded, they wouldn’t be around to finish their tale.”

“That’s assuming they aren’t able to come back, though, isn’t it, sir,” Harry said glumly. “And that’s what I’m supposed to be doing.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes, though Harry was more poking at the crust of the pot pie, watching it crumble into the filling, than actually eating it.

“It sounds like you are approaching this in a rather disorganized manner.”

Harry looked up, but it didn’t look like Dumbledore was making fun of him. In fact, he was swirling around the contents of his goblet, looking pensive.

“I’ve not done a whole lot of research,” he admitted. “I mean, I have, but not like this. And usually there’s—well, one of my friends is really good at this sort of thing. Mostly I just read what she finds worthwhile, and that’s enough.”

“You’ve not been taught in class?”

Harry shrugged. “I mean, I’m not really, um… I’m not that studious, sir. And there’s… my friend.”

Dumbledore nodded, and Harry shifted about uncomfortably, realizing he was essentially telling his headmaster he didn’t much care about his schooling. But the Professor just looked at Harry with that same contemplative look, and offered, “Well, perhaps this experience will be of some use to you, then. Would you like some tips?”

“Anything would be useful at this point, sir.”

“I didn’t see any quills or parchment in the library with you. Are you taking notes in any way?”
Harry shook his head, puzzled. “I haven’t found anything definite to work from. And why would I take notes, anyways? The books are right there. I don’t need to copy it down.”

“Oh.”

Dumbledore pushed aside his plate and produced his wand, and with a gentle flick produced a quill, ink, and several sheets of clean parchment. For some reason, the conjuring made Harry’s mind go blank. It was as though every time Dumbledore performed a spell he could actually feel the magic at work, which was of course absolutely ridiculous because Harry had never felt anything like that before. Maybe his time travelling had knocked a few screws loose. He pushed the feeling aside and tried to focus as Dumbledore pulled back the sleeves of his fuschia robes to avoid dragging them in the ink.

He divided the page with a long line, creating two uneven columns. “Now, this is only one simple, easy-to-adjust-to method, but when you are reading, it helps greatly to write any questions or thoughts you have down, even ones that feel foolish. I often find that when I go back to my notes later on I will discover patterns I hadn’t noticed while I was actually reading. Things that stood out to me will have clear connections between them.” He gestured to the page, scratching ‘no.’ in the smaller column and ‘thoughts’ in the larger. “Try this, when you go back to the library. Whenever you read something and have a question or thought, no matter how small, write it down. In the left column, mark down the page and paragraph. Or, if a quote stands out to you, if it particularly strikes a chord or you haven’t a clue what the author is trying to say, mark it down, too.”

Harry nodded slowly. It seemed straightforward enough, but… “That sounds like it will take an awful lot of time.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Perhaps. But it is better to read something once, and be able to look at your notes rather than have to re-read the whole book to capture a thought or idea again.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to just—you know, read as much as quickly as possible, so that I find out how to get back sooner? So I don’t upset the timeline, and all?”

“My dear boy. You’ve read enough already—do you really think you are going to simply ‘find’ an answer?”

Harry frowned, staring down at the page. It had only been a day. “Then what’s the point of all this?”

“Harry,” Dumbledore said sternly, and this time he did look disappointed. “I may not know you very well yet, but I can see you have a fine head on your shoulders, and a clever mind working between those ears. You are not going to find an answer because I very much doubt that one exists just yet. If there were magic which would allow wizards to travel through time, there would be legislation, and if there were legislation, I would know. I do sit on the Wizengamot, you know.”

“But there is!” Harry exclaimed, dishes and cutlery rattling as his hands hit the table with the translated force of his excitement. “I know there is! Two years ago—”

He cut himself off, realizing what he had said, and looked nervously up at Dumbledore. The man smiled, though he looked rather sad, stroking his beard with his long fingers. “Everything has to begin somewhere, my boy. Even magic. However much time has passed between now and when you came here from, somewhere between the research may have been done, and answers discovered.”

Harry wasn’t sure exactly what to call the emotion that was brewing in the pit of his stomach. He would have said it was horror, but it wasn’t exactly horrifying, what Dumbledore was saying, it
His thoughts found their way out in a harsh whisper. “Are you saying I’m going to have to *invent time travel*?”

Dumbledore spread his hands wide. “I don’t see why not.”

“But—I can’t do something like that!” Harry spluttered. “I mean—I’m just—you said I can’t do anything to change the path, or whatever you called it—I would say inventing time travel would count as a pretty major change!”

“You forget that several major changes to the world have happened multiple times. Writing. The shape of the solar system. Gamp’s Laws have parallels in the earliest South American ritualistic magics—and if I recall correctly, *An Extended History* goes into various points where different groups most likely possessed some sort of time travel mechanism. Whether or not you discover the key to moving forward through time will not prevent whomever made the same discovery in your timeline, so long as you do not cross paths with that individual.”

Harry, however Dumbledore was able to make his arguments appear logical, was still caught on the part where Dumbledore somehow expected him to, you know, invent time travel. If he had learned anything in his whirlwind of, admittedly, very disorderly research that morning, it was that people had already tried and failed at that pursuit. People who were undoubtedly much better researchers and magic users than Harry. People who knew *anything* about inventing magic, which Harry did not.

“I can’t do it, sir,” he moaned, sinking back into his seat. “Maybe if it were—if I were my friend, maybe. But I’m not. I’m—just Harry!”

As childish as that sounded, Dumbledore just tilted his head. “Are you prepared to accept that you might never see your friends and family as you know them ever again? That you might never return to the future?”

“No!”

“Then whether you are ‘just Harry’ or Merlin reincarnated, you can do it, because you must.”

Harry felt his eyes stinging with tears, and he blinked them furiously. He understood what Dumbledore was saying, but the man was asking him to choose between two impossibilities. “You don’t understand, sir. I have to go back. I can’t explain it; you said I can’t give you anything important, but it is—I don’t mean this in the way you think I do. It’s not me being unable to accept it—it’s not about me at all, really—but I have to get back, or it will be bad. Really, really bad. It’s more important than… than anything I can think of.”

The more he spoke, the more Harry realized the truth in his own words. He was tied to Voldemort. He had always been. And while he didn’t know why, since Dumbledore and the Order never told him *anything*, he knew that with Voldemort back, he had to be there. Whatever part he was supposed to play in the war, he knew that if he weren’t there things would go very wrong indeed.

And he meant what he said: it wasn’t about him. It was about Hermione, and his mum, and all the other muggleborns and people like his dad who had died fighting. He needed to be in the future, doing whatever is was he was supposed to do, because Voldemort couldn’t win. He just couldn’t.

Dumbledore studied him, his blue eyes squinting a bit with concern. “Don’t make the mistake of assuming you are not important, Harry,” he said at last, voice soft. “I don’t have to know what it is
you feel so passionately about to believe the truth of what you are saying. Your youth does not
discredit you from importance in the world.”

“I know that, sir… believe me,” Harry said weakly. When he was eleven, he’d discovered he was
Harry Potter, and that only mattered because someone tried to kill him as a baby—and it was because
of him that Voldemort had been able to come back to life. He probably knew that better than anyone.

“Then don’t assume that just because discovering a means of time travel is a large and difficult task
that it is beyond you. ‘Just Harry’ is the same as ‘just Godric’ or ‘just Merlin’. Or ‘just Albus’, if that
encourages you.”

Harry flushed. He could understand what Dumbledore was saying without pretending that ‘just
Harry’ was the same thing as ‘just Albus’, Thank You Very Much. He wasn’t that much of a child.
The man was Albus Dumbledore, for Merlin’s sake.

But the headmaster was not done. “Perhaps instead of considering your task to invent time travel,
think of it like this: you are going to read some books, and perhaps perform some spells. You may
even have to brew some potions. You can do all that, can’t you?”

Harry nodded slowly.

“Then, as that is all you are going to be doing, you will be fine. And if there is something you find
you cannot do, you will cross that bridge when you get there. That is what you are doing now, after
all. Just crossing a bridge.”

~

Chapter End Notes

Phew! Of course AO3 went down as soon as I got online to post this... but here we are.
Chapter Two. Thank you for your reviews and feedback, and welcome to the seventies!

(On a side note that I doubt anyone else here will care much about, I’m unsure whether
I’m going to continue posting to ff.net. Though posting there gets more page views/hits,
formatting is a pain in the ass. AO3 may go down, but at least uploading runs
smoothly.)
What Even is Time?

Chapter by noaacat, thenoacat (noaacat)

Chapter Summary

Harry delves deeper into his research. Unfortunately, the more he knows, the more he knows he doesn't know....

Armed with Dumbledore's dubious encouragement, a new-found conviction to return to the nineties, a quill and parchment, and a promise that he would take regular breaks to avoid worrying Hani, Harry returned to the library.

He decided it would be inefficient to completely restart An Extended History, having already read the first fifty pages, but for the rest of the book, he took notes like Dumbledore had shown him. It took several days to get through the one text, with all the cross-referencing and questions he had to write down, but when he looked at the growing stack of notes he was reminded of Hermione's dedicated process. That was enough to drive him to read another paragraph, another page, another chapter, and so on.

He found himself falling into a routine. In the mornings he would wake to Hani’s arrival in the tower, eat breakfast in the kitchens, then head to the library and slog through the books. Around two in the afternoon, Hani would fetch him to break for a bit of lunch, and then he would stretch his legs wandering around the castle.

When he ran into Dumbledore a few days after their conversation, he asked permission to take a broom out of storage. He was fairly certain the school brooms were the exact same ones Hooch had taught him to fly on, in much better shape but still terribly slow, but Harry was just glad he had a means clear his head. Flying had always done that for him. Umbridge had taken that away when she locked up his Firebolt and banned him from quidditch—just another line in her list of offenses against him. He needed some outlet for his frustrations, otherwise he blew up, and when he did, she was there to give him detention. If not her, then Snape… who would use it as a chance to berate him for not clearing his mind.

Flying still seemed to do the trick, but by the time his first week was up, Harry was fairly certain that something was going on with his magic. He'd always loved flying, but now it was as though he could tell exactly where he and the broom were in relation to everything else around them, because they were both buzzing with magic and everything else on the field was not, though he was convinced there was some sort of spell worked into the wood of the stands. It was exhilarating, at first, feeling the broom and his place in the world, but also distracting, and the more stressed out he grew the worse it seemed to be.

And once he started noticing it, he noticed magic everywhere. It was in the lights in the castle that lit up when he walked past, and the door to the library, which Hani said was actually charmed to creak. When he watched the elves at work in the kitchens, every spell they used seemed to press at him,
even when he wasn’t looking. And the fourth time he’d run into Dumbledore, it was just like the first: the headmaster was on his way somewhere with a purpose, and had magic practically crackling all around him—if crackling was the right word. It wasn’t like Harry could actually hear it. He couldn’t really see it, either, and though it made goosebumps chase down his arms and sweat trickle down his spine if he let himself be caught off guard, he didn’t exactly feel it as a touch, either, unless it was really touching him.

It was something entirely new; a sense Harry didn’t have words to describe. And when it caught him off guard, he had to be incredibly careful. It was almost as though the magic was fighting against his standard faculties, as though it was worming its way into his brain, pushing everything else aside to make room for it where the usual five senses were supposed to be. It was particularly annoying when he was eating. If the elves did any big spells, the food in his mouth would turn tasteless, and chewing thick, tasteless gunk was a quick way to lose his appetite. He couldn’t imagine how that worked biologically, but then again he hadn’t had any sort of science lesson since he was eleven, and this was magic anyways.

In the library, the closest thing he could find to his burgeoning ability was a description of a spell used by healers to visualize the flow of magic in the body. Sensing magic just didn’t seem to be something that people did. He considered asking Dumbledore about it… but he remembered what had happened in his second year when everyone had found out that Harry was a parseltongue. They had been afraid, because most people considered it dark, and Harry’s indelicate attitude towards the ability had only made it worse.

No, Harry decided he would keep this to himself, at least until he figured out what was happening. For all he knew, it was a side effect from being caught up in Fred and George’s experiment, which still hadn’t faded off. Or maybe it was something that was so common it wasn’t worth mentioning in the books, and Harry had simply never known that something was wrong with him, not being able to notice it. Snape had always called him deficient; maybe he really was missing something. Either way, drawing attention to it when he didn’t know what ‘it’ was seemed like an all-around terrible idea.

Besides, it wasn’t as though there was anyone to tell about it. Aside from himself and Dumbledore, the only other occupants of the castle seemed to be the elves, a few of the portraits that hadn’t sought other frames for summer, and the ghosts. Sometimes when he was flying he could see smoke coming from Hagrid’s hut, but the thought of talking to the man who had been Harry’s first introduction to the wizarding world and not being recognized made his heart ache enough to drive him back to the books. When he let himself sit still, he got caught up in missing Ron and Hermione and wondering if he’d be able to return without them ever knowing he was gone. The thought that he might not see them again…

It was better when he locked himself away in the library and read until he could barely think.

Soon enough, Harry lost track of the days. There was no difference between weekdays and weekends, and he moved through books almost mechanically, crossing them off from the list he’d amassed from the footnotes of *An Extended History*. While finishing each book gave him some small sense of accomplishment, on the whole it was disappointing. As Dumbledore had warned, *An Extended History*, the most focused of the books he had found, had only proved that there was no complete, proven, resolved solution to time travel waiting for him to find. Largely the book had discussed historical attempts to understand the way various civilizations had approached time, citing St Augustine’s musings as readily as it described a medieval German witches’ cult that had an annual time-ending ritual involving sacrificing a goat and drinking copious amounts of specially brewed mead until the participants were blackout drunk, following which they would wake to find that time had carried on, and so they would celebrate their apparent success in pleasing the gods by finishing
off the rest of the mead. There were several tales of things long lost, like the Chinese device Harry thought sounded like a time turner, and accounts from supposed travelers who were generally seen as charlatans or insane, but no wand patterns or incantations. Or potions, for that matter.

At last the castle grew so hot that Harry decided to take some of the books to sit out by the lake rather than suffocate in the stuffy library. He could imagine Hermione causing a fuss, since he didn't exactly have them checked out, but then he formulated an argument in return, reminding her that she'd once torn out a page on basilisks and wrote on it. And there was no Madam Pince around to check them out from, anyways, and it had been at least two weeks since he had last seen Dumbledore, and longer than that since their conversation in the kitchens.

“What day is it, today?” he asked Hani when she brought out his lunch to have as a picnic.

“Wednesday, July the thirty-first, Master Harry.”

Harry set his book aside. He was growing more used to Hani, who seemed to have taken on the role as his keeper, and she had stopped looking at him like she was going to cry whenever he spoke.

“I’ve been here almost a month, then,” he mused. “My friends wouldn’t believe it if you told them I’d spent a month researching. One would think I’ve gone insane, and the other would be disappointed I haven’t really gotten anywhere.”

“Master Harry must miss them terribly.”

“Yes. There’s... not exactly anyone to talk to here, except, well, you...”

Harry trailed away, not wanting to be rude. She easier to talk to than Dobby was—he was always making proclamations of Harry’s greatness or gushing about his life as a free elf, and while he was a great friend and all, it gave Harry a headache. Hani, on the other hand, rarely spoke. Leastwise outside of her insisting he have something to eat or get some sleep, when he was too caught up in his work.

"Dumbledore said you just came here this summer," he recalled, trying to kindle a proper conversation. "Does that mean... if you don't mind me asking..."

“Hani’s Mistress passed,” the elf said, her ears drooping. “Mistress in never having family, but she left Hani to Hogwarts so Hani would have a place. Hani is being very lucky.”

“I’m sorry about your, er, Mistress. What was she like?”

Hani settled back on her haunches, passing Harry a plate with an artfully constructed sandwich and a critical eye. “Mistress was being much like Master Harry. Always with her books, never minding her own health. Hani is doing her best to always take care of Mistress, but...”

Harry hurriedly took a bite of the sandwich. "You can just call me Harry, you know," he said when he'd chewed the dense bread and thick slabs of meat and cheese enough to get words around it. "I'm not your master. I'm just a student here—not even that, really."

“Master Dumbledore is telling Hani to mind Master Harry.”

“Well, I know that, and, I mean—thanks, really. But I’m no one’s master. My best friend would have a fit if she knew I were taking advantage of you.”

Hani was puzzled. “Hani is doing an elf’s work.”
Harry smiled as he swallowed at last. “Yes, but Hermione—oh, shit. Um. Never mind. Just—don’t tell anyone I told you that name, okay? I’m sick of not saying it—you can keep a secret for me, can’t you?”

Hani looked affronted, so Harry turned back to his explanation.

"Hermione—she’s a muggleborn, and muggles don’t do slavery, or anything like it, anymore. Well… they say they don’t; it happens, but it goes against practically everyone’s morals, and people like to pretend it doesn’t. Hermione—when she heard there were house elves at Hogwarts, she wanted to go on a hunger strike."

"Hani doesn’t understand. Why is Miss Hermione not liking elves?"

“It’s not that she doesn’t like you, she’d just… she’d rather you be paid for your work, is all.”

Hani’s eyes were widening with horror as she squeaked— “Paid?”

“Yes, well. I’ve got another friend… he’s a house elf, but he’s a little… his family was really bad to him, and I helped him get free. He’s happier with clothes. Er… don’t get upset, Hani; I know most elves wouldn’t be. I would never… But Hermione, she wants to help house elves like him, I think. She doesn’t understand that most elves prefer a family."

“This elf is being a very bad elf,” Hani said firmly. “A house elf without a house… Hani knows of nothing worse.”

“He’s not bad. He’s the best elf I know. And he has a house—he was hired here, a couple years ago.” Harry didn’t like the way the other elves had always looked at Dobby like he was some sort of freak. Harry had practically lived like an elf for eleven years, thanks to the Dursleys, and if he’d had the option to get free, he would have taken it. “I’ll take it you liked your Mistress, then.”

“Oh, yes,” Hani said, nodding vigorously. “Hani is being very happy with Mistress, and very sad that she has passed.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said again.

“Mistress is always treating Hani very well. She is even having Hani help with her research, when she is being very close to conclusions.”

“Really?” Harry asked, pausing with his sandwich halfway to his open mouth. “What was she researching?”

When Hani fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot, he quickly regretted his question. “You don’t have to tell me! I don’t mean to pry. I guess you can’t share her secrets. I just meant—well, maybe you could help me with mine. My research, I mean, if you’re used to that sort of thing. Except I don’t really know what I’m doing, and it sounds like she was a… professional?”

“Mistress was being very good at her work,” Hani confirmed. “What is Master Harry researching?”

Harry took his bite, an excuse to slow down and consider what he was doing. He had just thought it sounded as though Hani was proud of her special role in her Mistress’s life, and that it would be nice to give her something to do, but he hadn’t thought of actually telling her about his research. He chewed slowly.

"Has Hani asked too much?"
“What? No; it’s totally reasonable. I mean… I guess there’s no reason not to tell you. But I mean it—you have to give your word not to tell anyone. Even if somehow your mistress came back to life and asked you, I’d have to have your word that you would not tell. Can you promise me that?”

Hani shifted some more and reached up to tug her ears, her large eyes looking up with thought. "Hani can be promising," she said at last.

To Harry’s surprise, when she said it he felt a burst of magic course through her, and nearly jumped back when it hit him solidly in the chest. He swallowed. He hadn’t meant she needed to take some sort of magical oath! He didn’t know what that would do to her… but he suspected if Hermione ever found out, he would be in major trouble.

“Alright, then. You know that I appeared in Gryffindor tower earlier this month, right?”

Hani nodded.

“Well… it shouldn’t be possible, but somehow I was sent back in time. I’m from nineteen ninety-six, and I’m halfway through my fifth year. But I ended up here, and I don’t know how. Neither does Dumbledore. All my research is to try and figure out how it happened, and how to get back.”

Hani tilted her head, her forehead rippling with creases of concern. “Master Harry is trying to… leave?”

Harry gave up on the sandwich and set it back down on the plate. Turning to her, he pushed up his fringe. "I know it's kind of hard to see right now, but there's this scar on my forehead, yeah? When I was little, Voldemort—have you heard of him? Well, you will. He's… a bad wizard. He's coming to power right now, I know it—and he, uh, he killed my parents when I was a baby, and he tried to kill me. But something went wrong. Everyone thought he died, but last year he came back to life, and now everyone is getting ready for war again. I have to be there, Hani. I know I do. And I can't desert my friends like that."

Hani nodded slowly. “As Master Harry is saying.”

He let his hair settle back into place. "Hani… I don't know what else to tell you. In a month, you'll have a whole castle full of students to take care of."

“Master Harry must be thinking of himself,” Hani said firmly, straightening up. “Hani is doing whatever he is needing. Hani is helping.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “I don’t really know what I could have you do, though. How did you help your Mistress? If you can tell me, I mean.”

“Hani is fetching books and supplies.” She glanced around, and even though there was no one else by the lake but them, leaned in close to whisper: “Mistress is even teaching Hani to read, so Hani can be finding the right things.”

“House elves don’t read?”

“Elves don’t be needing it. Books and writing, those be human things. Elves don’t need be reading to be cooking and cleaning and raising little ones.”

Harry, who had spent the last month doing little more than reading and writing, frowned. “I don’t exactly like reading all that much, but… I can’t imagine not being able to,” he said. “But I guess I’m not an elf.”
Hani picked up his plate and added some steamed vegetables dressed with butter around the sandwich. “And Hani bes making sure Mistress is eating, and Master Harry as well.”

“Yes, thank you.” He took the plate, amused. “I think I don’t eat as much as your Mistress did, though, with the amount you try to give me.”

“Master Harry is being too skinny,” Hani replied, looking down her nose at him, arms folded across her pillowcase-covered chest. “Mistress is forgetting to eat, even when Hani brings her meals when she is reading. Mistress is not letting Hani take care of her, and Mistress is dying young. Master Dumbledore says Hani is looking after Master Harry, so Master Harry needs be eating.”

“Alright, alright.” Harry laughed, but it was only because he didn’t know how else to respond to that sort of statement. Maybe with another ‘I’m sorry’? Instead, he tried to move away from the whole death thing. “Your Mistress sounds a lot like my friend Hermione.”

"Mistress is never threatening Hani with pay!" the elf squeaked, horrified.

"That's… not what I meant. I just mean Hermione's always shoulders-deep in research. Ron and I don't even try to tear her away, really…”

He sighed, poking at his beans.

“Master Harry is finding his way back.”

"I hope so, Hani. I miss them. I really do. If it were nineteen ninety-six, I would be turning sixteen tomorrow, you know? I mean, I guess it's not really my birthday, here, but I wish I could spend it with them, anyways. I did last year, sort of, but that was the first time.”

Their conversation trailed off, Hermione and Ron's absence weighing heavily on his mind even when Hani urged him inside for supper and he went back to the library. It was even harder than usual to focus, imagining Hermione flitting about the bookshelves, finding this and that and carrying towers of books taller than she was up to the check-out desk, Ron moaning at her usual overkill.

Eventually, he gave up and went back to the dorms. Gryffindor tower seemed emptier than ever as Harry trudged his way up the stairs. He kicked open his trunk, retrieving the photo album Hagrid had given him in his first year, and found a photo of him, Ron, and Hermione from his second year. They all waved at him from the frame, grinning at something Colin Creevey, who had taken most of the photos Harry had added, must have said. It had been just after Hermione had woken up from the basilisk's petrification, and Harry still had the scars of his fight in the Chamber of Secrets on his face, but they all looked so happy with their arms thrown over each other's shoulders he might not have noticed.

As he flipped idly back through the pages, glancing longingly at the photos of the future, he found a page with a photo missing. He frowned, reading the label—Gryffindor Chasers, 1974—and glanced over at his trunk again, but he knew the photo wasn’t there; he’d gone through the whole thing organizing it twice now. He wondered when it had gone missing. He rarely took the album out of his trunk, except to add new photos, and it would have been in the dorm, where he would have found it again.

Turning back another page, he realized there were more gone. Lily with Professor Tofty, 1972. Gryffindor First Years, 1971. Spring Dance, 1975. There weren’t a whole lot, but enough that it couldn’t possibly be a coincidence. And they were all photos that would have been taken before Harry had arrived.
He stared at the empty slot of *Potter Christmas Card Photo, 1958*, thinking in circles until his head hurt. Beyond the label, there was no sign that any photo had filled the space. It was the point Dumbledore had tried to explain to him about the letter—normally, there would have been traces of magic left behind. Sometimes he could feel them in the pages of books that had been magically produced. Even if it was just that a charmed quill had been used, there was some trace. A magical photograph, removed presumably less than a month ago, would have left a lot more, and while he might not have been able to tell what it was just by the residue, that there was no residue at all was unsettling.

Was that what had happened to the invisibility cloak and the Marauder’s Map, then? They were unique items that existed elsewhere in the world, so they had ‘disappeared’ when he had been sent back in time? But how far did that rule extend—as far as he knew, even in magic matter didn’t just go in and out of existence. McGonagall’s explanations on the subject were some of the most confusing lectures he’d had, but that was the general idea.

Sighing, Harry closed the book and replaced it in his trunk. It was probably not the safest thing to have out. Instead, he pulled out one of the occlumency books Hermione had given him just before this unwanted adventure. The other one she had given him had vanished, too. He settled back down on his bed, hoping it would be there when he got back to the future, and flipped through the pages, reading the encouraging notes she’d left him.

He supposed he ought to be practicing, even if Voldemort hadn't sent him any weird dreams since he’d arrived. When he did get back, they would surely start again. Harry had gotten used to sleeping untroubled by the passages of the Department of Mysteries over the past month, and with hindsight and well-rested eyes, he was beginning to understand that he really had been obsessing over it. Which was probably exactly what Voldemort wanted him to do, and so that last thing he should be doing. Besides, he had made up his mind to really devote himself to the books to make it up to Hermione, before all this, and not doing so made it seem like he was giving up on his chances of getting back. That, he determined, was unacceptable.

It was easy to find exercise that Hermione had left a note on— *Seems like a good place to start*— and reading through the directions, Harry found them surprisingly simple. He put the book aside and lay back.

Turning his head on the pillow, he glanced around the room and started listing everything he found there—the beds, curtains, windows, bricks, the one pair of good robes he had hung up over the back of an armchair, the door to the shower—until he ran out of objects with names. He wasn’t sure it was doing much, but he kept on, now listing sounds: the wind pushing against the windows, his breathing, echoes of the moving staircases unhindered by the Fat Lady’s absent portrait. When he ran out of objects and sounds, he was still unsettled. Had he done it right? What else could he list? Bits of magic, he figured, would do the trick as well as sights and sounds, so he tried it.

He still wasn’t sure how exactly he was sensing magic, but the more he focused, the more he could feel. He closed his eyes. The curtains, even though he had to leave them open rather than get distracted by what he theorized was a muffling charm, had traces. His trunk had several items in it. He couldn’t distinguish between them, but he imagined that there was Sirius’s knife, and the sneakoscope, and the moving photos in the album. Even the book on the nightstand seemed to have magic enough for him sense. He’d noticed several of the books in the library had spells on them, especially those in the restricted section, which he had ventured in twice to chase down books referenced in footnotes and margins. The book on the nightstand wasn't like any of those or the *Monster Book of Monsters* he had latched shut with a belt in his trunk; it was just an ordinary book. But even it had magic in it.
The more he focused, the more Harry found. The lamps and candles… the windows… the paintings… the very walls seemed to pulse with it…

When he was startled awake the next morning, he wasn’t sure whether or not he had slept at all. Everything in the room showed in sharper relief, especially Hani, who stood in a rapidly dissipating cloud of magic, peering anxiously up at Harry.

“Is Master Harry being well?” she asked.

“You just startled me, is all,” he said, sitting up and finding his glasses. She was carrying his robes, freshly laundered, in a wicker basket. “Thanks for th—tha—” He broke off in a yawn, bringing the quilt up to cover his mouth. “You know, you don’t have to come all the way up here every morning. It’s a bit of a trek.”

“Hani is not walking,” she said.

“What?”

“Hani it… apparating.” She pronounced the word carefully, draping the robes as they had been left on the armchair.

“You can’t apparate inside Hogwarts,” he mumbled automatically. That was what Hermione was always reminding them—she’d said it often enough that even though Dobby had always done so without any of them batting an eye he couldn’t help but echoing it, even now.

Hani looked at him, unimpressed, and with a half-spin, a barely audible ‘pop’, and a wave of magic that struck Harry like a punch to the gut, vanished.

When she returned a moment later, basket left behind, she found Harry still reeling. “Master Harry?” she asked in alarm.

“Right,” he said, growing a shade paler as the second wave of magic struck. “House elves can definitely apparate in Hogwarts. Who’da thunk.”

He leaned back against his pillows, not sure if he was going to sick up. At least now he knew the source of that particularly dizzying sensation. It was as though where Hani had been when she disapparated a body of magic had remained behind and then raced to chase after her. When she’d apparated in, the magic was trailing to reform where she stood—though once it reunited with her body, it became indistinguishable from the rest of her magic.

“Master Harry!”

Harry winced, blinking several times. Somehow he’d been so focused on the magic, he’d lost track of everything else, which apparently included the way Hani was shouting for his attention. “Sorry, Hani. I think I’m still half-asleep…”

“Should Hani not be apparating to the tower?”

“What? No—I mean, you make a great alarm clock. Wait, I mean…” Hani was still regarding him with suspicion, so Harry hurriedly tried to untangle himself from the blankets and stand up. A failed effort: one step and he’d tripped, rolling on the cold floor with a yelp as his elbow hit stone. He jumped up just as quickly, swaying with a fresh dizziness, and, face flushing, his abashed grin looked more like a grimace. “You’re fine, Hani. Let’s just pretend this never happened.”

“…as Master Harry is saying.”
Her green eyes followed him as he made to pick up the robes from the chair. Harry swallowed, neck hot, trying to forget the fool he'd just made of himself. "Have I done something wrong?" he asked. "It's fine if you apparate, Hani, I promise…"

"Hani bes wondering why Master Harry is wearing those awful clothes."

Harry looked down. He was wearing one of Dudley's old gym outfits, an orange t-shirt with SMELTING ACADEMY PHYSICAL EDUCATION printed in peeling white letters on the front and brownish-red sweatpants rolled over several times at the waist. "They're the ones that came with me when I was sent back," he said glumly. "Normally I only wear them for chores, but… I guess I'm just lucky I had any at all."

"Why is it being so… large?"

"Oh, well—they're my cousin's old things. I think he's about three times my size in most directions."

Hani pursed her lips. "Master Harry's family is not be shrinking them?"

"Well, my Aunt tries, but they're muggles," he said slowly, watching her face. He knew that Sirius's house elf, Kreacher, had picked up on the Black family's blood prejudice, and he'd never actually spoken of such things with Hani.

She shook her head in disappointment, making no comment. "Master Harry is letting Hani fix them," she said. There was no room for argument. Harry nodded, and she looked him up and down, then with a snap she and the mix of clothes he had been cycling through disappeared. Harry, left standing holding his one good pair of robes, looked down in dizzy confusion to find himself only in his pants. He shook his head and stumbled off towards the shower.

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On the second of August, one month since Harry had been sent through time, Harry could be found pacing in circles around his workstation in the library. It was scattered with stacks of books, makeshift page markers sticking out at odd angles, sheets of parchment filled with his spidery handwriting and lopsided diagrams nearby, and several empty bottles of ink in a row leading to one still halfway filled. Some of the books were propped open to useful pages. There was a half-copied table of the Futhark runic alphabet propped up to one side, but it was little use to Harry, who did not actually understand anything about how runic magic worked.

Near where his regular chair sat empty, Harry's latest sheet of notes was taunting him from the table. His research had taken him across various tales of time travel, but the more Harry read, the more the books gave unsatisfactory explanations into the mechanics of what had happened. The only example of time magic with any sort of common, modern application was in a book on clocks. While there were probably several interesting implications of being able to accurately control a clock to the second with a single spell for hundreds of years, Harry had no clue what they were, and no time to waste on it.

Surprisingly—and more than a bit upsettingly—the nearest thing Harry had found to an existing piece of time magic was something he'd already known about. Time turners. Only, they weren't time turners as Harry knew them, but rather curiosities left from Roman times. Apparently, they had worked much like Harry remembered, allowing their bearers to travel back some hours and
seemingly exist in two places at once, which from what Harry had gathered was one of the chief troubles with time magic. On the other hand, they seemed to require an exceptionally powerful witch or wizard to activate them. They had all been made by a single, somewhat mad sorcerer who had, according to legend, made the mistake of insulting the emperor too many times and gotten himself executed. As magic users with the power to use them were few and far between, the devices fell into obscurity.

If they still existed, they were extremely rare. Only in one of the books that referenced them, *Curios & Artefacts of Roman Origins*, did the author even claim to have seen one, and that book had been published at the turn of the century. The drawing included in the book looked very little like what Harry remembered Hermione’s time turner looking like, except for the inclusion of a small hourglass, a relatively recent invention at the time it had been made. Hani had managed to find him another book that described the materials the devices were made from (etched gold, goblin-made glass, and finely ground volcanic sand), and it referenced another work that was said to go into more detail.

That was where the trail had gone cold. No matter how Hani and Harry searched, they had to conclude that the book simply wasn’t a part of Hogwarts’ collection.

Harry had then sat down to write everything he could remember about Hermione’s time turner. It wasn’t much. He hadn’t known she’d had the device until Hermione had thrown the chain around his neck and sent them back, and she’d given it back to McGonagall once they had returned from their mission.

But between his memories and what he had been able to find to read, he had a reasonable list:

1. Time turners could only go back in time, not forwards.
2. They could only go back a few hours at a time, though maybe there were different versions with different lengths of time—but that was speculation.
3. They had some sort of magic to exist in two places at once.
4. Users were warned to be careful to stay out of their own paths, because apparently interacting with oneself was cause for insanity.
5. There was no spell casting or magic coming from the user, in the version that they had used. It had worked by flipping the hourglass back the number of hours they had needed to go, no incantation or wand magic about it.

That was the gist of what he could faithfully remember. It wasn’t much, but enough to give some clues… and stir some questions.

Hermione had warned Harry that they couldn’t let themselves be seen, but why? They had, after all, already lived the bit that they were re-doing, and they clearly hadn’t seen themselves the first time around. The more he thought about it, the more Harry came to believe that they couldn’t have done anything new, because technically, it had already happened. He remembered trying to explain to Hermione how he had known he would be able to cast the powerful patronus that saved him and Sirius from the dementors: he had known he could do it because he had already seen himself do it, even if had thought it was his dad at the time. Though he had experienced it twice, on opposite sides, it technically had only happened once.

So the problem was even larger than ‘how does time travel work’ or ‘how does one go forward in time by twenty and a half years without waiting around for time to pass’, though those weren’t exactly small questions to begin with. On the latest page of his notes, which sat so loudly tantalizing
him from its position on the table, he had scribbled out a new series of questions. Can anyone actually change the past? How can I be experiencing ‘now’ as a ‘future’ to something that hasn’t actually happened yet? How is it possible to go backwards in time but experience it as forwards in time? And finally, in a fit of frustration, he had scrawled, What even is time?

That was a question that none of the books seemed to want to directly address. It felt ridiculous, impossible, even, but the more he read and the more he tried to piece together how fabled rituals and artifacts might work, the more it became clear that time itself was a vital part of his research. That probably should have been obvious from the start, but so too should have been the answer to the question ‘What even is time?’. In fact, the only explanation he had found came from the introduction to An Extended History:

On the one hand, time moves ever onwards with enduring tenacity and insurmountable commitment to its task, and by its Sisyphean persistence we can mark it with gears and clockwork and measure it in consistent intervals. On the other, the longer a clock marking the seconds is held under scrutiny, the longer those seconds grow, excepting in the instance that the watcher is racing against it, in which case the clock’s pace is redoubled, for time is loath to lose any race. In a way, we are all time travelers, our time magic nothing more than the illusion of our perceptions. (Alas that as a device perception is unreliable. More often than not, it seems to work against our intentions than for them, but I have in my years met sorcerers of such extreme focus that even were the very planes of this existence in flux around them time would not be allowed to go racing on out of their grasp.)

So too are we travelers in another sense, for every wizard of sound mind and healthy practices is known to take such journeys on the nightly: in dreaming, we traverse time as freely as we navigate space in waking. Our conscious perceptions of the shared world suspended, we might sleep several hours and not know the difference between minutes and days. And when we venture into Morpheus’s realm we may live for years and return no older than we left as easily as we may return to a childhood long lost and never move a hair in either instance.

Such ponderings are best left to the minds of poets and muggle fictionists, but this work intends to focus on the history of the subject, as best as a field so rooted in fable, paradox, and the impossible can hope to deliver one. I shan’t touch on the muggles’ ideas on the matter. Those are, for the most part, the naïve workings of minds which had not even considered the possibility of moving through time until the last century and as such are subject to the peculiar ideas which nouveaux vogue topics so readily inspire. For us of magic, travel through time has been a dream (and, as you will see, an occasional reality) well recorded since the Babylonians, yet muggles have just recently managed the barest comprehension of the concept…

Perhaps it was the patronizing tone that had Harry’s spirits dampened: he felt more in line with the muggles and their purported ignorance in this explanation. He feared for a time his confusion might be another matter of things so common knowledge to most wizards that no one thought to mention it, but when he asked Hani his question she had first been confused, then stubborn.

“We is not needing to know what time is, Master Harry, only that it be happening at all. We is not be needing to know what magic is to be using spells, and we is not be needing to know what time is for it to keep moving.”

“But that’s because it’s magic! It’s called magic because we don’t know ‘what’ it is.”

“Then time is time because you is not knowing what it is,” Hani said, her hands on her hips. “And
now is time for supper.”

Harry hadn’t had much more luck than that.

It was clear time was measurable, that a day was a spin of the earth and a year a trip around the sun, and everything else was fractions of that, but beyond the centaurs only charlatan fortune tellers looks for the future in the skies. Harry had memorized star charts for Astronomy and star signs for Astrology, and neither seemed like they would help in the slightest.

He knew time was supposed to be one directional and linear, and that the mind could change how he perceived it, but he had only briefly been caught in the downward spiral of fearing this was all a vivid hallucination before Hani rid him of the idea by smacking him solidly over the head with An Extended History and sending him off to bed. When approached it with a fresh mind, he knew time wasn’t solely one directional or linear, because there he was. The living proof.

And so Harry had taken to pacing about the library, trying to think of a single thing he could say about time with any certainty. Every time he thought he had something, the thought slipped away from him before it was finished, or turned out like an amateur poet's excessively dramatic ramblings. Even ‘it exists’ seemed a statement inviting debate at that point.

And so it was that when Dumbledore returned once again to the library, he found the boy wearing new circles into the ancient carpet. Harry didn’t jump when he heard the door creak open. He knew it was Dumbledore. He had felt his approach: the man had been casting some sort of powerful magic that morning, and it left traces that seemed to invite Harry’s scattered attentions to gather around him.

“Having trouble again, my boy?” the headmaster asked.

“Professor,” Harry greeted, lackluster. He forced his legs to still. “I… haven’t spent the last month wandering around or avoiding reading, I swear. You just seem to catch me at bad times.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I can see you have been hard at work,” he assured him, gesturing to the table. Harry glanced back, but the nearly blank page front and center was so intimidating he had to start pacing again. Otherwise, he thought he might just scream.

“I mean, yeah,” he said. “But that hasn’t meant much… Are you here for a book again?”

“Returning the one I was fetching last time,” Dumbledore corrected. Even as he said it, he pulled the tome from the folds of his robes and sent it flying back towards its spot on the shelves behind the librarian’s desk. Harry glanced at it curiously, following the telltale bit of magic to keep track of it amongst all the others, but the spine was unmarked and it was probably none of his business what Dumbledore was reading, anyways. “Have you eaten yet? I’m on my way down to the village, and it seems you need to get out of the library.”

Harry wanted to protest, but he knew Dumbledore was right. Pacing circles wasn’t getting him anywhere. “Alright,” he said. “Thank you, sir. I should probably tell Hani…”

"She'll know where we've gone. Elves have a remarkable gift for keeping track of their charges. A skill which most teachers do envy, I'll have you know."

Harry frowned, but followed Dumbledore out and down the hall. “She isn’t… she doesn’t risk becoming my elf, helping me out, does she, sir?” he asked. “I don’t want to leave her behind like that, when I go. I’ve seen what happens when an elf is dismissed, and she just lost her Mistress and all…”

“She may feel some loyalty to you, Harry, but I can assure you her bond is firmly to Hogwarts.”
They took a side exit out to the grounds, which were sweltering in the heat. Harry had never gotten used to the way most wizards went without trousers under their robes when it was hot, but he was sweating in the jeans Hani had somehow managed to work down to his size. Still, they walked in comfortable silence, the traces of a gentle wind through the trees at the edge of the Forbidden Forest making it the heat bearable. The grounds were lush with sun-kissed greener, and down at Hagrid's cabin, the garden was bursting with oversized vegetables.

As they approached the gatehouse that marked the edge of the castle grounds, Harry could almost see the barrier of enchantments that made up Hogwarts' wards, they were so strong. It was—he wasn't sure if ‘beautiful’ could apply when he could not actually see or hear it, but the magic flowed together like the threads of an tapestry. It was old magic, ancient magic, woven in with spots that comparatively glowed with newness, and it was very, very powerful. Overwhelmingly so. Harry tried to bite the inside of his cheek, to keep from losing himself to it. Since he had tried the occlumency exercise, he had noticed that when he let himself get distracted by magic he would zone out without noticing, like he had when Hani had demonstrated her apparition. But the wards commanded all his attention, no matter how he fought it, and it was as much as he could handle to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Naturally, the moment he had taken his first step on the other side, his toe struck a tall cobblestone, and he would have gone toppling to the ground if not for Dumbledore's quick reflexes. The man had his wand out in a heartbeat, a charm holding Harry just inches from the ground, and Harry wasn’t sure how long he hung there until he fell that final distance; between their proximity to the wards and the raw power behind Dumbledore’s casting, the magic seemed to override any last bit of sense in Harry’s brain, and it wasn’t until he gently hit the stone that he regained himself. He jumped to his feet, nearly tripping over himself in his haste, and was sure that under the freckles he was as red as his faux-Weasley hair, and spluttered out his thanks.

Dumbledore seemed to find the whole situation amusing. “Do mind your step, Harry,” he urged, tucking his wand away. Needless to say, Harry had kept his eyes on the ground for the rest of the walk, watching his feet intently and trying to direct his attention away from the wards.

Ten minutes later, they arrived at the village. It was the first time Harry had been around so many other people since he had arrived in the seventies, and it was a nearly overwhelming experience. Every witch and wizard around them, whether they were using their magic or not, seemed to stand out, more than the house elves in the kitchen had ever done. While none were nearly as powerful as Dumbledore (even though Harry had realized the man was constantly keeping his magic in check, projecting himself as someone less powerful than he really was, there still was little comparison), if he could have seen them they would have just been dimmer lights, or if they had been sounds, each one would have been a different pitch, tone, or chord.

Then there were the shops. Zonko's joke shop, in particular, was like a Christmas tree wrapped in more fairy lights than it could hold, glistening as it was with thousands of tiny bits of magic. Harry was grateful when Dumbledore steered them off the main road. He directed them towards the Hog's Head rather than the more populated Three Broomsticks, and Harry couldn't help but be relieved. He was becoming a recluse, he thought, but he didn’t really mind.

They were served by the same aging bartender that minded the pub in the future, and Harry, finally somewhat settled inside the building, couldn’t help but gape when he realized exactly how similar the pair of elder wizards looked. And felt, for that matter—while the barman’s magic wasn’t on the same level as Dumbledore’s, it was certainly more intense that the average wizard’s, which seemed peculiar for a man running a dingy pub.

“Ab,” Dumbledore greeted in his horribly cheerful way, sitting down at the bar even as the other
man glared.

“Still here,” was the terse response.

“You didn’t make that soup again, did you? Pity. I thought you’d actually gotten a handle on making something decent.”

“I’ve told you not to come around here,” the man growled. Dumbledore ignored him, patting the stool beside him. It creaked under the light pressure. Harry gave it a wary look, unsure if it would hold his weight, but climbed up nonetheless. It was the last stool at their end of the bar. There was hardly anyone else inside, only a man with a pig snout at the opposite end and a hunchback of sorts huddled in the corner by the window.

“Are you two… related?” he asked slowly, unsure if he was overstepping.

“This handsome lad is my brother,” Dumbledore said, at the same time as the barman growled:

“Tha’ ugly bastard’s the pain in my arse tha’ won’t get lost.” He eyed Harry warily, and Harry found he shared Dumbledore’s shockingly bright blue eyes, no matter how gruff he looked otherwise.

“Aberforth, tha’s me. Who’re you, then?”

“Harry here is doing some research up at the castle,” Dumbledore explained lightly. He pulled out his wand and summoned his bread through a shadowy doorway behind the bar, though it did not get past Aberforth, who snatched it with all the reflexes of a quidditch player.

“Summer at the school? Shame. Would’a thought a lad’d have more sense.”

With that, he pulled a grisly-looking knife from under the counter, which was alarming until he used it to slice off two pieces of bread. Despite his complaints, he seemed inclined to serve them, as he passed them each a slice before retreating into the doorway, the sounds of cutlery clanking a moment later.

“So, Harry,” said Dumbledore as two plates of food floated out of the kitchen. Aberforth emerged a moment later, but ignored them. “Tell me about your research.”

Harry glanced around. He hardly thought that this was an appropriate place for delicate discussion—Aberforth and the pig-snouted man were trading friendly insults at the other end of the bar, and the hunchback had been shooting them furtive glances since they’d sat down. Then again, he had to remember that in 1975 no one had a clue who he was, and no one would be hanging on to whatever he said with Ministry goons to report back to. Besides, he didn’t want to insult Dumbledore’s brother by refusing to talk. Politeness aside, he seemed like someone Harry would not want to piss off: where Dumbledore’s magic was curious, probing the world around him, Aberforth’s seemed to be folding in on itself over and over again, into a tangled web that had Harry’s teeth clenching.

"There's not a whole lot to say, really," Harry admitted softly. "I mean, I have some ideas about things, based on what I know from… where I'm from. But it's not much. And every time I think I'm getting somewhere, there's a book I need that the library doesn't have. Or I get to the end of the section, and they comment that 'it's an interesting story, but impossible,' and tear down hours of reading in a single sentence. They always wait until the end to do that. It's… terribly inconvenient.”

“Ah, yes. All problems I have faced myself,” Dumbledore said sympathetically. “Vast though Hogwarts’ library may be, some books are simply not suited towards being kept at a school. I was surprised to hear you have brought Hani into your research, though.”

“She said she helped her Mistress with her work,” Harry said with a shrug. “And she promised me
she could keep things to herself. No one ever thinks to ask the house elves, anyways.”

“True. They are remarkably underutilized creatures, for all that we wizards overwork them. In any case, I am sorry to hear that your research continues to frustrate you. It does seem you have found a better approach to it, at least.”

“Yes, thanks to you. I’ve been taking notes, and I see what you meant. And… I’m started to think that you’re right about more than that, sir.”

“Oh? About what?”

“That I may need to invent the magic entirely,” Harry said glumly. He scraped the tines of his fork along the grey slab of meat, feeling about as lively as whatever animal it had come from. “I don’t know how, though. The whole concept is frustrating to even think about.”

“Is it?”

"Yes. Everything about it is, well, paradoxical.”

“It is time you’re investigating.”

"Not just time! You know, for every story about actual magical time travel I've found, the person traveling stays in the same physical location on the planet? Even though the Earth and everything on it is constantly moving? That shouldn't even be possible!”

“No?”

“I mean, if I’m standing in Gryffindor tower and I go back in time to before Hogwarts was built, where would I appear? In the air where I was standing, or on the ground where it is going to be built? Or if I’m standing in an empty lot in London and I go forwards, and between now and then something is built where I’m standing…”

“Ah. I see you are underestimating the ability of magic to compensate for these discrepancies, m’boy. A common mistake, but you forget one of the most powerful forces at work in any spell: intent.”

Harry sighed, reaching up to tug at his hair. “Yeah, well, that just makes it that much more complicated. I’m bad enough at the stuff we have to use for transfiguration. I can’t figure out what I have to pay attention to and what I don’t need to. And this—I mean, everyone agrees it is possible and has been done before, and I’m proof, I guess, but we don’t have records of it at all, and it makes my head hurt going in circles around it all.”

Dumbledore hummed, taking a delicate bite of the meat stuff, as though Harry wasn’t ranting and it was a fine dining establishment they were seated in. “Well, perhaps when you reach a point of needing calculations, I or one of the faculty could look over what you have come up with. With appropriate memory modifiers in place…”

“If I ever get that far,” Harry said glumly.

“As for your spatial-temporal relevance problem, I believe that I may have an answer for you now.”

“Please.”

“Wizards and magic are both bound to the Earth.” He picked up his goblet of whatever it was Aberforth had given him and sipped in a tasteful way that the liquid inside doubtfully warranted. “Every bit of magic we do is relative to the conditions of our planet. Things such as natural gravity,
“air pressure, the position of the stars in the sky… we do not have to account for these universal matters when we cast simple spells, because we are both products of the Earth.”

“But the Earth is a product of the Universe,” Harry argued. “And so are we.”

“A. We are all made of the same stuff as stars.”

“What?”

“It’s a muggle sentiment you’re expressing, my boy. But muggles too have a concept of belonging to the Earth, only more of them call it ‘God’.”

Religion seemed a dangerous tangent, and Harry forcefully steered them away. “Well, most spells don’t take time into account, either. The only time I’ve seen it has been for multipart delayed-action charms, and even then it’s usually relative, or depending on the positions of planets and the like. But mostly we don’t worry about it. We just… assume it’s going to continue happening same as ever.”

“That is true.”

“And did you know—we don’t even have a clear way of describing what time is! Not that I’ve found, at least.”

Dumbledore considered that for a while. “Quid est ergo tempus? Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio. Si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio.”

“‘What is’… sir?”

“‘What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain, I know not.’ Augustine, I believe.”

“Oh. An Extended History quoted that. Just… not in the Latin.”

“Well, I seem to recall some muggle works that explain it, or at least attempt to, but I’m afraid those might prove no more useful to you than our own sources, as they rely on muggle sciences and hypotheses. Dimension and physics: two things magic inherently disagrees with. But, speaking of works…”

Dumbledore paused to pull something out of his sleeve and passed it to Harry: a parchment with a list of titles and authors, printed in careful calligraphy. “Our librarian replied to my inquiry, though she is currently visiting family in Romania and there were some understandable delays.”

“I’ve already found a few of these,” Harry said, scanning it. “Oh, but not that one… or those…”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I don’t have time to read all of these!” Harry exclaimed, though he quickly remembered to lower his voice. “We don’t know how this works. What if time passing here is also passing there, and when I get back, it is— well, it would now be a month since I left.”

"I can see how that would be inconvenient, especially for a student. And worrying about your friends, family, and teachers—myself included, I suppose…"

He chuckled, but Harry only frowned deeper. What would Dumbledore do, when he heard that Harry had gone missing? The headmaster had been avoiding him well enough the whole year… then again, maybe he already knew that Harry was going to get stuck time traveling, and that’s why he’d
been feeding Harry all that crap, that he ‘would understand soon’...

Unfortunately, it was impossible to know. Harry just nodded. “I might even miss my OWLs, sir. What happens when you miss those? Can you retake them? Are you held back a year? I don’t want to be held back a year.”

“Mostly we try to keep students together,” Dumbledore said soothingly. “It can be difficult to arrange, as an extra year gives you an unfair advantage, but it always works out. However, I am pleased you are thinking about them. You see, I invited you down here for a reason.”

“Not just for the culinary experience, sir?”

“Alas, no, although I am afraid I have a brief meeting with Aberforth on the schedule. No, it is rather more serious than Ab’s, ah, cooking.”

Harry, remembering that Dumbledore was in the midst of preparing for a war, sat up a bit straighter and spoke a bit softer. “What is it, sir?”

“Have you given any thought as to what you will do if you are stuck here in a more permanent manner?”

Harry took a sharp breath in, clenching his hand around the fork. “Stuck here isn’t an option, sir. I’m putting everything I’ve got into this research. If there is a way back, I’ll find it. Or discover it, if I have to.”

“I admire your dedication,” the Headmaster said. “But surely you realize by now that this sort of research takes time? Months, clearly—years, perhaps—and to experiment as you may find you need to will require that you have a place in society, to earn funds and aid from others.”

“If I think like that, at some point it won’t even be worth it to travel forward,” Harry grumbled. “And you’ve said it before: there’s a high chance that the longer I spend here, the more I risk changing the future. I don’t know if that’s true, by the way—half of what I’ve read disagrees with you—but I don’t want to change things, I want to get back where I’m supposed to be!”

“Harry,” Dumbledore said soothingly. “I understand where you are coming from. But what if the theory you mentioned earlier is correct? What if time is passing there as well, and you miss your OWLs? What if, five years from now, you return and not only have you spent five years studying this very narrow branch, but you have also missed out on your OWLs, or your NEWTs?”

Harry winced, stabbing at the meat. “Five years might be too long, sir,” he said lowly. “If it were that long—unless I absolutely knew I could get back to the exact moment I left, it might be better for me to stay and change things, at that point. But we both know that if I actually change anything, I might be, um, preventing my own existence. And we don’t know what would happen if I did.”

Dumbledore hummed. “Then we are in agreement.”

“How’s that?”

“You cannot exclude the possibility that you are now living the life you will live forever, and that there is no going back.”

“No!” Harry snapped. “I refuse to believe that.”

From the other end of the bar, Aberforth raised a bushy eyebrow at him. Dumbledore smiled at him until he scowled and turned away.
“Peace, my boy. Whether or not you want it to be true, you cannot deny the possibility. And even if you do get back—well, as I already said. My point is, you cannot focus solely on this research.”

“What?” Harry stared at him. Then he set his fork down so he could wipe his glasses, but even when he cleaned them, he could find no humor in Dumbledore’s pensive face. “Sir, I have to! I have to live and breathe and eat this, put as much into it as I can manage, to get back as soon as possible! Don’t you understand?”

“I do agree that you should endeavor to return… home, as soon as possible. However, you have yourself pointed out that there are several critical milestones in your life that you may be missing as you remain here. Your OWLs, for example. If you do return, and time has moved on, and you are the only one without your OWLs, what then?”

Harry let his head sink into his shoulders. “I shouldn’t have brought it up. I don’t even what to think about that, sir.”

“And yet, I am afraid you must.”

Still, Dumbledore let a few minutes pass on in silence, and they weathered the bites of strangely chewy meat, keeping their own company. At last, the elder wizard set aside his fork and took a drink from his own flagon, the foam frothing on his beard.

"It needn't be so horrible as you expect. You are a student of Hogwarts, whether you are in the past, present, or future, and so Hogwarts will have you. If you wish to remain at Hogwarts come September to make use of the library, I am afraid I must insist you return as a student, so as not to arouse concern or draw undue attentions."

“Wouldn’t being a new student already draw attention?” Harry asked, though his heart fluttered with anxiety at the thought of ever having to leave Hogwarts. The books he was using in the library aside, where would he go? He only had a handful of galleons scrounged from his trunk, which had always been more than enough for him before but would certainly not support full living expenses. He wouldn’t even know where to start, finding a place to stay.

“Perhaps. However, if you are to live in this time, you will need to know your contemporaries. And finish your schooling.”

Harry sighed, and dropped his fork again, scrubbing absently at the grimy counter with his sleeve pushed up over his palm. "And if I find my way back? Won't it stir up trouble, or, I mean, gossip, when the new student suddenly disappears? Won't that have an effect on the world?"

“It would all be a matter of back story,” Dumbledore said. “Which can be arranged at a later date. For now, I should like you to merely think on the matter, as I will need your answer by the end of the month. And if there is anything else that would assist you in your research that I might provide, you have but to ask.”

Harry thought about it. “There is one thing,” he allowed. “There’s a lot of discussion of runes in the books I’m reading, and some of the others are written in them entirely, but I’ve never done any runes work. Do you have a suggestion of a, um, primer, or something?”

“I’m afraid I studied the subject so long ago that the introductory texts I know would seem as ancient as the runes to you, my boy,” Dumbledore chuckled. “But I will write Professor Notaro. She would know.”
Swimming in the Riptides

Chapter by noaacat, thenoacat (noaacat)

Chapter Summary

Harry's summer comes to a close... and with it brings an onslaught of faces both new and old.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After a quick stop at Scrivener's to restock on quills, ink, and parchment, Harry made his way back up to the castle. He had left Dumbledore at the Hog's Head, which was probably for the best: it took him several minutes of staring at the gate to actually dare to pass through again, gathering all his courage and trying to push out the overwhelming influence of the wards. On the other side, he managed to call for Hani before he toppled over, and she appeared with a dizzying burst of apparation, eyes wide with alarm as she towered over him. He tried to focus on her small and familiar magic, focus so much that he could ignore the power of the wards. It wasn't entirely successful, but he did manage to push himself up off the stones and stagger away.

The explanation that followed—once Harry was safely sitting by the lake, away from any magic that overwhelming—had him begging Hani to keep his secrets once again. She seemed distressed that he had been so dramatically affected, even though she accepted his stumbling explanation of his 'sensing' magic, and that only sealed Harry's conviction to keep the matter to himself. It clearly wasn't normal. That was enough for him.

He distracted his friend by setting her to track down the books the librarian had listed, and distracted himself with a renewed vigor for his research. In the days to come, he was reading so intently he often found himself being shaken awake in the small hours of the morning, having fallen asleep at his table, lines of sloppy notes imprinted on his freckled cheeks.

He was beginning to realize the true scope of what his task entailed.

Several of the new additions to his reading list were coded in runes, and Harry had to set aside the second week of August to study the book the professor had forwarded him, memorizing the alphabets and their equivalents in English. While a handful of texts were using the runes in their intended manner, to communicate in ancient languages that Harry would have no hope at deciphering anytime soon, a surprising number of the ones he'd found were simply used as a sort of intellectual disguise. The book explained that in the late 17th century, in the beginnings of the Statute of Secrecy, it had become common practice to code in runes when one was living among muggles in case a notebook was misplaced or a guest got nosy. The practice had passed on through the years among the scholarly sorts, particularly for personal records of experiments and magical theorizing.

While it might have been simple enough if it were just a matter of learning another version of the English alphabet, many of the books he'd found were using runes to code other languages, including the ones they had been conceived for, as if the text in Latin and Greek hadn't been hard enough for Harry to slog through. For the most part, however, it seemed as though in spell forming runes had more to do with the independent meaning of the marks, unbound from any language. In fact, there
were several additions found among common Anglican spell stones that had no alphabetical purpose, and served solely as a marking of meaning. A spell crafter might compile a chain of fifty runes, the placement of each one an important part of a greater pattern, but the 'text' would have no spoken equivalent.

By the fifteenth of August, Harry had given into the obvious. If he had any hope of completing his research, he had no choice but to stay at Hogwarts.

Dumbledore found him on the eighteenth, but it was only for a brief introduction: Madame Clarke Notaro, the Professor and resident Mistress of Runes, had returned from her vacation. She was delighted at Harry's apparently speedy progress through the book she had sent him, and suggested that if Harry were interested in taking her class, she would be happy to have him.

"Is that even possible?" Harry asked. He had to admit it would be useful to have an actual teacher.

"I'm sure we can work something out," Dumbledore said in that cheery way that Harry found inspired absolutely no confidence. For Professor Notaro's benefit, he went on to explain: "Harry's previous learning arrangements have reached a temporary stopping point. He's been doing some independent research here this summer, and we are not sure as to how long he will be staying with use."

"Well," said the woman, beaming at him with a startling earnestness. "If you keep up the hard work and are still here come September, I'm sure you'd fit right in with my students. We might even be able to move you up to the second level if you keep studying on your own."

"Second... but I've only just..."

She patted his shoulder. "You've made more progress in two weeks than many of my students make in two months. Of course, it wouldn't be easy, but something tells me you do not mind taking on a challenge." When she nodded towards Harry's haphazard workstation in the library behind him, Harry couldn't help but flush. If only Hermione could see him now.

It was strange how a single addition to the castle completely changed the feeling of it. Harry only ran into the Professor once every few days, as she tended to take her meals in her quarters rather than the kitchens, but she made it clear she was happy to answer any of Harry's questions. She was a cheerful witch in her late sixties, salt-and-pepper hair always coming loose from the bun she kept it up in, and while she did not have too much magic there was a very calming sense about it. With her encouragement, Harry found he made good progress through the runes work, though in the library his piles of reading materials were only growing as Hani turned up more texts.

On August the twentieth, Hani called Harry down to the kitchens for lunch with the Headmaster. To his surprise, as he approached the giant still life of a fruit bowl that guarded the entrance, he could feel not just Dumbledore waiting for him but another presence, a magic much more rigid and contained than the headmaster' or Professor Notaro's. He stood outside the portrait for a few minutes, trying to identify it, before he realized there was a much simpler solution and going through.

He was in for weightier surprise: standing with Dumbledore and a small cluster of house elves was none other than Professor McGonagall. They didn't seem to notice Harry come in, so he lurked by the doorway, trying to get a good look at her. She was much younger, her hair free from the gray streaks and her cheeks, though still high-boned and creased with laughter lines, had a bit of weight to them. He thought he recognized the green robes she wore, however, and that made him swallow. He would have to be very careful around the Transfiguration professor. Dumbledore knew he had come from the future, but around McGonagall and the others who were still teaching in the nineties, he would have to watch what he said. He knew McGonagall would be the first to catch on to anything
out of the ordinary.

A minute later, the elves disapparated in one great wave of dizzying magic, and the two professors turned to find Harry by the door. Hani managed to make herself apparent behind them, and he breathed a sigh of relief: he had been trying to teach himself to focus on her when the magic got to be too much, ever since her presence at the wards had helped him keep his head.

"This is the one who has taken up residence in my tower, then?" McGonagall said as he came closer, scanning Harry from head to toe. Harry nodded. "What on Earth did you dislocate the Fat Lady for?"

Harry opened his mouth in confusion, unsure as to what she meant, but then he remembered that the portrait of the Fat Lady was still sitting on the ground beside the entrance to Gryffindor tower. He winced. "Hani said she was on vacation, ma'am," he mumbled.

"And you had to take up in Gryffindor tower?"

"Minerva," Dumbledore said soothingly. "Give the boy a proper greeting, or you'll have him scared away. You're far more frightening than you realize, my dear." McGonagall harrumphed, but did not press the matter. "Harry needed a place to stay, so I set him up there. It's hardly Gryffindor hospitality to deny him that."

"Gryffindor hospitality?" she echoed. "Well. I suppose. Not that there is a precedent."

"Then this will be the precedent for future cases. Now, as I was saying earlier, Harry may be staying on into the school year—have you given it any thought, my boy?"

Harry nodded, a jerky motion. He had never lasted long under McGonagall's scrutiny, and she seemed to be in a bad mood. "Yes, sir. I... I think I'll have to."

"Don't sound so resigned," McGonagall said dryly. "It's been a few years since we have had a transfer student. I trust you'll have papers?"

"I'll owl for them," Dumbledore said before Harry could wonder what papers he could possibly need. "He's not had a traditional schooling as we do here, of course, but he is on track for his fifth year."

"Fifteen?" McGonagall asked, looking him up and down again. She seemed skeptical of that, too. Harry was on the short side.

"Sixteen, end of October," he replied.

"Very well," McGonagall said. "You will have to be sorted with the first years at the beginning of the year. I suppose for now you may remain in the tower... though I must insist, Albus, that you never leave a child up there alone for the summer again!"

"He was hardly alone," Dumbledore said, gesturing to Hani. The elf's ears stood straight up even as she seemed to shy with embarrassment. "Hani has been making sure he has what he needs..."

"Albus!"

Once Dumbledore had placated McGonagall with increasingly empty-sounding promises, he and Harry sat down for lunch. This one was much more edible than the one they had shared at the Hog's Head, a simple soup with fresh bread and some fruit.
"I'm glad to hear you have decided on a course," Dumbledore told him.

"I'm not really sure what other options there are, sir. And I'm not really sure how this is going to work out, either. I'm sure there's loads of people who are.... um, related to the people I go to school with going to school now."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "Hogwarts is responsible for over sixty percent of the youth education in Britain, these days, and climbing every year."

That struck Harry as a much lower number than he had expected, but he moved on, knowing that if he got Dumbledore sidetracked they would never get to anything important in their conversation.

"I just mean, what if one of them is able to remember or recognize me, in the future? Or if someone figures out that I've..." He glanced around warily, but even Hani had disappeared by now. "That I've traveled through time, sir? It seems really risky..."

"You will have to be more careful of how you speak to people, I agree."

"More careful—sir, I have been careful!"

"Of course," Dumbledore said, tone pointedly pleasant. "And I am pleased you trust me enough to let your guard down a bit, but I really must remind you to be cautious."

Harry bit his lip to keep himself from retorting. Dumbledore was practically the only one he'd had any proper conversations with for the last two months, not counting Hani, and he hadn't been 'letting his guard down' around the old wizard at all. "So how do you think I should, uh, move forward?"

"First, we will have to create a reasonable backstory accounting for your transfer."

"Right," said Harry. He tried to think of one, but drew a blank. "I... haven't known anyone to transfer before, sir."

"That is exactly what I am talking about," said Dumbledore.

"What?"

"You have to be more careful. You just gave away information that could lead me to find you."

Harry frowned. "How could that possibly lead you to me?"

"Our last transfer student was three years ago. Before that one year. Before that, two. It is hardly so unusual an occurrence that a five year gap would not stand out."

"Five year gap?" Harry echoed.

Dumbledore nodded. "You let slip that you are a fifth year student preparing for your OWLs. Why, you just told Professor McGonagall that your birthday is in October—"

"That's not actually my birthday," Harry interrupted. "I adjusted it, based on when I left and arrived and all. So I will be sixteen years old, based on time I've been alive, but it's not my actual birthday."

Dumbledore nodded again. "Good. However, we will have to similarly adjust other matters as well. Your name, for example, and your appearance."

Harry blinked for a moment, but then he remembered—he had never actually explained to Dumbledore about Fred and George's experiment!
"Shit! I mean—er—shoot? I mean—actually, sir, this... this isn't what I really look like. Normally, I mean."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow.

"Just before I... there was a bit of a magical accident in the common room. Not related to the whole time travel thing, I mean... Anyways, I'm not actually a redhead—"

"Harry," said Dumbledore, shaking his head and lowering his tone. "Did we not just concur that you need to be more careful?"

Harry gaped. "'Not a redhead'? Are you really likely to suspect everyone who is not a redhead to be me? And—and this is you, sir! We are having this conversation specifically to cover this sort of thing!"

"However, you could have let me believe that this is your actual appearance, and then we would have changed it to something else, and you would have had an extra level of security. And now I know there was an incident in the common room before you left."

"Sir, there's incidents in the common room ten times a day."

"And as headmaster of the school, I hear about them. One that could apparently change a student's appearance at least semi-permanently would certainly reach my ears."

"I kind of doubt that, sir," said Harry, but Dumbledore waved him off.

"Generally speaking, what happened?"

"Um..." Harry wasn't about to get caught in another trap of saying too much. Not if Dumbledore was just going to call him out for it. "I'm... honestly not really sure, sir. Some stuff toppled over, and there was a big cloud of color, and everyone around got hit. I thought it would wear off, but..."

"Here you are," Dumbledore finished. He drew out his wand. Harry couldn't stop himself from flinching. The moment Dumbledore put his hand on it there was a little flare of magic connecting between them that he hadn't expected. The wand itself had a rather nasty character, unlike Harry's. Maybe it was just that his wand was suited to him, he wasn't sure. Either way, Dumbledore noticed him start, and his movements slowed to something more deliberate. "Do you mind if I cast a few spells, to see if I can identify it?"

"Of course," Harry said quickly. "Go ahead."

He sat as still as he could as Dumbledore's magic washed over him, feeling like static was running through his hair or burn salve was brushing cool across his cheeks. Focus on Hani, he reminded himself, but if Dumbledore said anything while he cast it, under the spell's distraction Harry missed it entirely. He was only just able to comprehend the curious frown that pulled at the corners of Dumbledore's mouth before he tucked his wand away again.

"I'm afraid I don't recognize it," the headmaster said, his voice sounding like it was coming from a great distance. "There's no particular spell hanging about, so if there is a way to reverse it, it will have to be in potions."

Harry slowly let his breath out, trying not to draw attention to the fact that he had apparently been holding it. "If?" he echoed. He couldn't imagine being stuck looking like a Weasley for the rest of his life... then again, it might be easier, especially if everyone else who had been in the common room was stuck that way as well... he'd never been able to blend in...
"I believe it would be more the work of a potions master to reverse. I have a mastery, of course, but it was an honorary title awarded after my work on dragon's blood... No, a more talented touch would be necessary to work out what has happened—and she would need more information, which I am not going to ask for."

Harry nodded. He imagined that in the future, Snape would be put on the job. While the potions master was unpleasant, he was undoubtedly a 'talented' potioneer… and he wouldn't want to be stuck with any more Weasleys in his class than he already had to deal with.

"Will it do for now, sir?" he asked.

"You are certain you look different enough?"

"Yes," Harry said, but he hesitated. "Although..."

The scar on his forehead was still there, and even if it wasn't particularly visible through all the freckles and his red fringe, it was on his face, and it was recognizable.

"Harry," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I'm afraid I may have been a hair too harsh. I know that you need to be cautious; however, I have promised to take a memory-dampening potion when you find your way back, have I not? If there is something that you need to change, you should tell me."

Harry had already forgotten he needed to withhold information from the man, but he nodded anyways, reaching up to push back his fringe. "There's this scar," he said. "It's on my face, so it's rather recognizable. I don't think it's possible to get rid of, but to change...?"

Dumbledore leaned forward, peering at him through his half-moon glasses. "Ah, yes," he said. "I had wondered about that. It is a curse scar, is it not?" Harry nodded slowly. "Well, it does not seem to be too powerful—"

Harry nearly laughed, but caught himself with a cough.

"—so we should be able to change it, as you say... yes, with a bit of... Do you mind?"

He brought out his wand again, and Harry blinked for a moment, trying not to let himself be intimidated by the prospect of Dumbledore pointing that wand at his face, but he managed a nod. Dumbledore stood and came around the table, and tilted Harry's head back with a gentle hand, gingerly examining the scar. Harry swallowed: where Dumbledore's hand touched his face, it was like his magic was seeping into Harry's skin, even before he raised his wand and tapped the wand lightly against Harry's forehead.

"I imagine that must feel rather strange," Dumbledore said with a chuckle. Harry nearly jumped out of his seat—Dumbledore was once again seated across from him—when had he... Once the magic had started to flow towards the scar he couldn't...

Harry reached up to touch his head, and found the skin their foreign and smooth. The scar had migrated up towards his hairline, where it stretched out as a single, straight line, barely perceptible beneath his fingers.

"Weird doesn't even begin to cover it, sir," he said.

The scar seemed oddly lifeless beneath his fingers, even with the traces of Dumbledore's magic still working to bind it into its new place. It had always been his connection to Voldemort, hurt when the Dark Lord was angry or, worse, happy. Now it felt small in a way it never had, like a balloon that had been drained of air, though it seemed to grasp at Dumbledore's magic and pulling it in, like it
was trying to find some strength. Maybe it was the other way around, and the magic was pushing its
way in, like a crab seeking out a new shell. Harry let his hand drop, trying to let go of his unwanted
perception of the thing. But it had plagued him for as long as he could remember, and now? He
might not even be connected to Voldemort anymore, for all he knew!

Of course, there was only one way to really test that, and Harry did not intent to.

"Are you alright, Harry? You are looking rather pale."

Harry caught his reflection in the shining surface of one of the pots stacked against the far wall,
where Hani was frozen staring back at him. She hadn't reacted even as she saw Dumbledore's magic
push him out of control—good. She'd kept his secrets.

He forced himself to smile, lying through his teeth, ignoring the way his forehead seemed to be
screaming at him—wrong, wrong, WRONG!—as Dumbledore's spell secured the scar. "Just a bit of
a chill." He tried to loosen his jaw, knowing that with gritted teeth he wouldn't look at all convincing.
"If I could make my glasses squarish—er, thanks. I could change my eyes, I suppose, but..."

"That is unfortunately not a matter of simple transfiguration. I could re-arrange your forehead in a
permanent manner, but eyes... they are rather more complex. Delicate." Dumbledore stroked his
beard thoughtfully. "I believe I have an appropriate potion in my stores, however. It would not
entirely change them, but the color would be rather less noticeable under it—if you are amenable."

"Would I be able to change them back?" Harry asked.

"There is a potion that works to the opposite effect, yes. Would you like it?"

"I think I probably should."

"I will have Hani bring it to your next meal, then. Anything else?" Harry thought about it, but shook
his head. There were other scars that people could identify him by, but he looked different enough
already, and he really shouldn't be getting close enough to anyone else to have them seen. "I've got
time on my side. People won't remember other things that closely, I don't think."

"Very well," Dumbledore said. "Now, for your story... perhaps a name would be a good place to
start."

"A name?" Harry echoed. Now that he considered it, 'Harry Potter' was rather notable, and would
especially be after 1981. That being said, he really couldn't imagine being called anything else.

"Unfortunately, names are tricky things. It will have to be something familiar, so that you naturally
respond, but not something that other wizards will recognize it."

"Dudley," Harry said after a minute. Then he winced. Yes, he would respond to Dudley, but only
out of his time-honed instinct of needing to know where his cousin was for his own safety, but did he
want to hear that name any more than he had to? Actually... "Dudley... Harry—Harris? Harri...
Harri-something. I'll go by Harry. It'll be safest."

Dumbledore considered that, tilting his head to the side. "You will absolutely respond to Dudley?"

"If I have to," Harry said, and echoed his thoughts aloud: "Who would want to be called 'Dudley',
though?"

"Hm... Harrigan, perhaps," Dumbledore mused. "It's not a traditional name."
"My dad could be muggle, it's fine," said Harry. "I grew up with muggles anyways, and I've been told it's pretty obvious. No one would know me, if I didn't go to Hogwarts."

"Very well," said Dumbledore. He conjured up a quill and parchment, and this time Harry managed not to wince at the magic, even as the bit still lingering on his forehead strained to be part of the greater whole. "Dudley Harrigan. Father... let's say John Harrigan. That sounds muggle enough. Mother..." He looked up, considering Harry's face. "That is trickier, if she was a witch. Our community is small enough that someone would have known her."

"Then I didn't know my mum's name," Harry filled in. It was true, in a sense, which made things worse; the first time he'd heard his parents' names had been the day he'd turned eleven and Hagrid had introduced him to the magical world. "Living with the muggles. Just that she was some witch, maybe even muggleborn. They died when I was little—car accident." He felt his mouth twisting as he said it, remembering for years what he had been led to think for years. Drunks in an accident. "I can have lived with my dad's relatives, an aunt and uncle. They didn't want me going to Hogwarts, but I needed to get my magic under control, so I had a... a tutor. Is that something that happens?"

Dumbledore nodded, scrawling the information onto his parchment in elegant, loopy writing. "I can fill in the details for you. And how did you end up here?"

Harry chewed on his lip, considering it. His mind went back to the Triwizard Tournament—after Cedric's death, there was whispering that the school was going to be closed down, like had been planned when the Chamber of Secrets was reopened. "Magical accident," he said flatly. "A boy died. Tutor in recovery, unable to teach."

"It would be best, then, if this tutor went abroad for his recovery. Plenty of wizards assume pseudonyms for their work. You knew him simply as 'the Professor', and you were told he was going to... France for treatment, but not much more than that. He was a secretive man. As he would be, if he were teaching for a coven, which would be the most likely."

"The Professor," Harry echoed. It was a straightforward enough title. "What do you mean by a coven?"

"There are a handful left in Britain—groups who exist outside of the governance of the Ministry, or so they declare. They rarely interact with the rest of the wizarding world, and take magical steps to guard their secrets, but I have contacts among most of them. We'll say that your 'Professor' knew me. I put your relatives in contact with him when they did not want you to attend Hogwarts, so he asked that I house you, not wanting to send you back to the muggles after a magical accident. It's not unusual for magic to act up..."

Harry shook his head. "No, they should be gone, the muggles. Left the country, or something, but I didn't want to go with them. It... I don't have anywhere else to go, right now. The story should reflect that."

Dumbledore crossed out a bit from the last line he had written. "They had to have their memory wiped, then," he amended. "The magical accident was too much for them to handle. Without the responsibility of taking care of you, they moved to... New York. You haven't heard from them since."

"Do we need anything else?"

"You said your birthday is at the end of October?"
"Put it on Halloween. Easy to remember."

"Alright. Thirty-one... October... 1959." He looked down at the page, surveying his notes. "That should do it, for now." Drawing out his wand, he duplicated the page, cast another charm that Harry couldn't identify but seemed to link the pair with magic, and pushed the second copy towards Harry. Harry didn't touch it, but nodded his thanks. "You'll want to memorize that. Fill it in with more details as you think of them, and my copy will be updated as well. I have some favors I can call in at the ministry to make this official. I'll send you any paperwork with Hani as it comes. In the meantime, practice makes perfect."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said. "I... don't know how I would do this, without your help. I don't have a way to repay you—"

Dumbledore stood, folding his parchment and tucking it into his robes. "Put it out of your mind. Really. It would be better for you to forget this is concocted, and embrace it as reality."

It rained the last week of August. Harry would have found it dismal if it weren't such a relief from the heat. Between sudden showers and glimpses of sunlight, the more regular drizzles carried with them cool air that cleared the stuffiness from the library. Up in Gryffindor Tower, thunderstorms brought booming echoes that shook the windowpanes, but after two months of nearly unbearable silence, that too was welcome: a soundtrack to ease his sleep. Besides, this was Scotland—Hogwarts was no stranger to weathering storms and overcast skies.

As the weather grew lively outside, so too did the halls inside the castle begin to bloom. By the twenty-fifth, six more professors had returned from their holidays, including two familiar faces: Professor Flitwick and Professor Sprout. Harry had made an admirable effort at practicing his introduction as 'Dudley Harrigan, call me Harry' with them, along with Professor Brianne Stephenson, an entirely new face who apparently taught divination and preferred to keep her own company, according to Sprout.

Harry could understand the divination professor's reclusiveness. He was doing his best to sequester himself in the library, away from the new bodies of magic. Of course, he could not completely ignore them; once classes started there would be hundreds of students and if he didn't want to draw attention to himself he would have to be able to follow a lecture without getting lost in other peoples' magic. Eventually, he enlisted the help of Hani and tried more of the meditation exercises from the occlumency book. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, he would close his eyes and focus on the magic until he could move past the spells coursing through the castle walls, and he would push his way through the portraits and books and enchanted lights until he found one of the professors to focus on, usually McGonagall, who was closest, or Dumbledore, who had the most notable magic around him. Meanwhile, Hani would ask him questions, quizzing him on the backstory he and Dumbledore had laid the groundwork for. If Harry could focus well enough to answer, he was doing well. If he could not, she would levitate him a few inches up off the bed and drop him down until he broke free of his trance, and they would start again.

He wasn't sure it was the more effective means of addressing his problem, but the fact of the matter was he did not really have any other options beyond his own ideas. Though Hani had searched for more references to such an ability, the closest she had found were in restricted medical texts. With more professors returning, Harry felt rather hesitant to remove those from the Restricted Section, so
he had pulled her off the task, and let her join the rest of the house elves in their frenzied scouring of every inch of the dormitories and common hallways. It was only the other elves' hesitance to set foot in the library that kept Hani with him; she was single-handedly doing all the cleaning there, and doing it without magic, to avoid disturbing preservation charms and book enchantments. Harry helped her roll up carpets and haul them out past the creaking door when he caught her attempting it on her own.

Finally August unfolded into September. Harry returned the books to the shelves, filing check-out cards for only two, and packed away his things in Gryffindor tower. Hani had procured robes for him from the lost-and-found, repared to be like new, and Dumbledore had forward him a set of textbooks, 'on loan from the School's supply'. Anything else that he needed he would have to pick up at Hogsmeade later in the year.

On the morning of September first, once he was sure all his things were clear of the tower and secured in his trunk or bag, he exited through the Fat Lady's reinstalled portrait. He would be sorted with the first years later that day, and no one was to know he'd been in Gryffindor previously, so Hani collected his trunk, depositing it in the hall where the returning students' luggage would appear on arrival. Besides, according to Hani, the room he had lived in was actually the home of Gryffindor's returning sixth years. If he returned to the tower that evening, he would be living on a different landing.

Shortly after he entered the kitchens for breakfast, Hani urged him out again: Dumbledore had asked for his presence in the staff room. He rushed across the castle as quickly as he could. He must have looked rather frazzled when he arrived; Peeves had been working on some sort of prank on the stairs, the Fat Friar threatening to fetch the Bloody Baron. Ghosts were even worse than wizards for grabbing at his attention with their raw magic, so Harry had taken the long way around to avoid another headache.

Of course, he couldn’t avoid the lounge, and that was where the real headache was waiting: the whole staff was assembled. Not only did the gathering of so many powerful magics put his concentration to the test, he was amazed to find how many familiar faces crowded the room. McGonagall, Sprout, and Flitwick aside, there was Hagrid filling up a whole corner, and a startlingly clean-shaven Filch holding a scraggly, mewling kitten with matted fur to his chest at his side, listening to the half-giant going on about caring for the 'poor thing' even as he shielded her from Hagrid's overwhelming voice. Madam Pomphrey, who, like McGonagall, only differed from how Harry knew her in the luster of her hair and the fullness of her cheeks, sat chatting with Madam Pince, whose sharp nose and frowning mouth were almost unnervingly the same as they had ever been. He even recognized Professor Sinistra, the witch who taught Astronomy, looking very young and nervous in her seat between Professor Notaro and another witch.

And, of course, there was Dumbledore.

"Come in, come in," the headmaster urged as Harry came to a halt in the doorway. Harry took a few steps forward, but there was so much magic...

"Many of you have been introduced already, but for those of you who have not: this is Dudley Harrigan, who will be joining our fifth year class."

"Er. Hello," he managed to get out. They were staring at him.

"Tell them a bit about yourself, Harry," Dumbledore prompted.

Harry swallowed. He could do this. He had gone over everything a hundred times. "I'm..." He licked his lips and swallowed the lost words, trying again. To the professors, at least, he would just look
nervous. Maybe that could play to his benefit. It wasn't even really a misconception—he was nervous: a single wrong word and his whole ruse could be given up... "I'm Harry. My, um... there was a bit at of a magical accident at my old, um... with my old tutor's group. And I'm to study here, at least until... the Professor recovers."

A rotund man sitting to Flitwick's left made a sympathetic sound. "How very horrible, m'boy."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. He probably meant Harry's stammering. Harry, at least, thought it was. "Now, introductions... Yes, you've met Minerva, Filius, Pomona, Clarke, and Brianne already... Next to Clarke there is Aurora Sinistra, graduated last year, give a little wave, Aurora—and there's Elizabeth Finch, stepping in for Defense. Then Filius, and Horace Slughorn..."

The list went on, and Harry struggled to keep the unfamiliar professors’ names and faces in his mind when their magic was much louder and clambering for his attentions. Then, after Dumbledore finished his list and Hagrid called out to introduce Filch’s ‘new kitten, Ms. Norris’, he had to focus again—the arithmancy professor, whatever her name had been, asked in a cloying voice unfortunately reminiscent of Umbridge’s, "But if he hasn't had a Hogwarts background, how will he fit into the course work?"

"It will be a transition for everyone," Dumbledore said diplomatically. "That being said, having seen Harry's dedication to research first hand, if there are any areas where he is truly behind, I am sure he will catch up."

Harry’s ears burned at the somewhat construed compliment, but he rather wished the headmaster hadn't given it. He was staying at Hogwarts first and foremost to research time travel, and really did not need to have any extra expectations placed on him.

The rotund man, who Dumbledore had identified and as Professor Slughorn, Head of Slytherin, was eyeing him speculatively. “Still, it is the lad's OWL year, Albus. What do you say, Mr. Harrigan? How would you stack up to our subjects? Your strengths and weaknesses, that sort of thing?”

Harry thought very carefully about his answer. If he worded things right, he could affirm his back story, but he could just as easily give himself away. “I'm... best at defensive charms, sir,” he said. “Passable at transfiguration, at least on the actual casting side, and I know my way around a garden. I’ve not done any arithmancy, really, but I had some arithmetics in muggle primary, and I was, uh, passable at that too, I suppose... but that was when I was ten. In potions... not so much. And I'm hopeless at divination."

“Most people are,” Stephenson said with a haughty sniff.

“And runes!” Notaro exclaimed. “He’s a quick learner, just started, but I’ll have him in at the second level before the term is out, mark my words.”

“Highly unlikely,” Stephenson quipped. The others ignored her.

“Well, we’ll make a potioneer of you yet, don’t you worry,” Slughorn said cheerfully. “And you are welcome, of course, to join one of the OWL review groups. A few students even do some extra work for me, over the holidays. A bit of extra practice will do you good, hm?"

Dumbledore clapped Harry on the shoulder, making him jump. The hand was just as quickly removed. “I’m sure Harry will do fine. In the meantime, we must get on to the meeting. Harry, the other students will be arriving around six o’clock this evening. You are free to do as you like until then.”
Harry nodded and hurried away. The moment he was around the next corner, he gasped and leaned up against the wall, then shook his head and hurried further, putting as much distance as he could from their oppressively gathered magic. He returned to the kitchens, but the motions and spells and sounds of the full house elf staff at work made him dizzy, so he ate as quickly as possible and fled to seek refuge away from all the busyness—only to remember, halfway to Gryffindor tower, that he could not return. He wandered around aimlessly until he found a nice niche to read in, the same oddly sized room he had found after his floo chat with Sirius and Lupin. It had only been two months since then, but time seemed to have stretched out to be so much longer. Well, really, it had been twenty years since the meeting, just twenty years in the wrong direction. Twenty years and two months both.

Harry had the occlumency book in his bag, so he perched on the window ledge and flipped through it, the halfway memorized notes echoing through head in Hermione’s distant voice. He was about to start a year at Hogwarts without his friends. Ron and Hermione had been two of the first Hogwarts students his age that Harry had met—the two first, if he discounted Draco Malfoy, which was probably for the best—and he could hardly imagine what the school year was going to be like without them.

It was uncomfortable to even think about. He focused on the book instead, flipping through until he found an exercise he could do alone. Eventually he tried the one he had started with back in July, which he had come to think of as the ‘counting game’, and took it slow, gazing out the window to list every color he could find on the grounds below before easing himself into the magic. It was easy to find the kitchens, where the house elves burned like embers sparking with little spell flares. By comparison, the staff room was a volcano waiting to erupt, a potential maelstrom of magic strangely entwined and contained. Slowly, patiently, he separated them all out: Notaro’s calming glow, McGonagall’s rigid lines, Slughorn’s surprising power lazily drifting away from him, probing at the other professors’ as Dumbledore’s often did—but Dumbledore’s, locked up tight, was almost absent in the unnatural containment he had affected since the other professors had begun to return. When the meeting ended, Harry traced their separation, observing their magic as it left trailing paths through the castle.

Then someone activated the Room of Requirements. The sudden push of the castle’s magic overrode any focus that Harry had managed.

That was how Hani found him several hours later, gazing down past the book without seeing, and she gently shook him awake. Harry pulled back from her hand, startled, and it took him several long moments to process where he was. The rain on the window seemed obnoxiously loud, now that he could hear it, and the gray clouds harshly bright. He scrunched up his face and took a few deep breaths, trying to regain his footing in reality, and only then realized that Hani was standing there waiting on him.

“What is it?” he asked, but his voice came out sounding more like a dog’s snarl, and he shook his head again, trying to snap himself out of it. “Sorry. I didn't mean—sorry. Do you need something, Hani?”

“Hani is going to be worrying about Master Harry.” Her ears were drooping, tiny fists clenching at her bronze pillowcase. “Master Harry is always getting lost, and Hani is not always being there…”

“I'll be fine, Hani,” he said. He started to get to his feet, but his knees didn't seem quite ready to support him. “I got along well enough before you—I mean, I’m going to miss… it’s not I'm leaving or anything!”

Hani shook her head. “Students is arriving today. Hani is becoming very busy, very busy indeed,
and is not always being able to watch Master Harry.”

“Well, I’ll come down to the kitchens to visit you.”

She sniffed, and Harry, seeing her wide green eyes quivering, panicked. “Don’t cry, Hani! I promise I’ll be careful. You’ve been... a good friend, and you’ve helped me out a lot.”

“Master Harry is too kind,” she said, lifting the bronze pillowcase she wore to wipe her eyes. “But Hani is not alway able... Master Harry still is forgetting his lunch.”

Harry laughed, trying to lighten the mood. “Is that all? I’ll come eat with you, Hani. You’ll know. I promise. It's not like I have any other friends here.”

Hani blew her nose on the pillowcase and vanished it with a snap of her fingers, looking warily up at him. “Master Harry is needing to be eating with the others,” she said lowly. “Or there will never be any friends.”

Harry laughed. This time he was able to get to his feet, though when he stood the world seemed strangely liquid as it sloshed around in front of him, but he hid that with a smile. “It’s time for lunch, isn’t it,” he said. “And I forgot. That’s why you’re on about this. Well, come on, then, I’ll eat whatever you throw at me. I’m going to miss your personal cooking if you make me eat in the Great Hall, Hani.”

He followed her out of the room and down the steps, and many of the portraits whose occupants were just returning from their illustrative holidays found the sight rather odd—a student walking through the main halls side by side with an elf, before the train had even arrived. But the other paintings, the ones who had remained the summer long, were pleased to have something to contribute to the flurry of back-to-school gossip, and eagerly filled in their companions about the summer-long presence of the strange boy.

As Harry sat eating his lunch (a task that took a rather long time, as even with the return feast preparations Hani took the time to provide him a full meal) he watched the house elves at work. His mind had settled some. Their magic was no longer overwhelming to him, after so many meals spent the same way, and as they cooked slabs of meat larger than their bodies and skinned enough potatoes to feed an army the clanging of pots and pans faded into the back of his perceptions.

He felt comfortable in the kitchens, more so than he did anywhere else in the castle, at this point. Maybe it was because he had spent so many years working as the elves had—not nearly so efficiently, or with such amazing displays of magic, but cooking and cleaning and gardening and sleeping in the cupboard—that he felt so at ease among the elves. He knew it was one-sided; even after two months taking his meals there he still caught elves staring when they thought he wasn’t looking, wondering what a student could possibly doing in their space. But they were familiar to him. Elves were something of a constant at Hogwarts, in a way that students were not. He wouldn’t be surprised if several of these elves would still be working at Hogwarts in the nineties. Perhaps he had even met Hani, when he had been visiting Dobby and Winky in the previous years. He had no way of knowing.

When Harry was done with his lunch, he found he did not want to leave, to retreat back up to the little room all alone or risk spending time in Madam Pince's domain, so he sat down by the fire and went back to the book. One of the elves brought him a wooden chair with a faded green pillow on the seat, and another a cup of tea, which he balanced carefully on the armrest as he curled up, basking in the warmth of the fire as he read on about minds and closing them off.

He remained reading there for hours, barely noticing the passing of time or the changes of the world
around him, and the elves let him be. He might have remained there until he finished the book; despite his previous difficulties with occlumency he couldn't help but find the explanations of different sorts of mind magics fascinating. There were techniques for imbuing magic into memories, to keep them as sharp as the day they were made, and others for locking them away, not removing them but hiding them so deep that even you could not find them. The writing was always returning to occlumency, yes, but there were also discussion of illusory spells, and the difference between those that created images over the top of reality and those that tricked the mind into believing in hallucinations, and magic that could be woven in dreams. It was fascinating, really, and inspiring in a way that Snape shouting ‘clear your mind’ and tearing into his brain would never be.

He was just reading ending a section on the importance of maintaining healthy dreaming even while practicing intense occlumency when a certain chill crept up his bones, raising the hairs on the back of his neck one by one. For a moment, it felt like all the magic in the castle had vanished, even though he could clearly see the house elves still at work with their levitation and heating charms, their subtle dances weaving dessert pastries in the air… though they seemed to be drifting further and further away from him, like the room was stretching…

And then, above, the castle groaned as the great main doors opened, and the flood of students crashed in, carrying Harry along with them...

“Master Harry!” Hani was calling. She stood before him, shaking his arm, little sparks of magic Harry could barely notice bursting from her hands. “Master Harry!”

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to focus on her, but it was like trying to separate the ocean into molecules and atoms. There was too much. Their magic was wild, half-controlled, fighting for space in the hall, squeezed between the magic on the tables and woven into the enchanted ceiling. But he tried, tried, focused until he could hear the rumbling of the feet above him, and feel the heat from the fire through his robes, and opened his eyes to meet Hani’s terrified gaze.

"Master Harry is needing to be upstairs!" she said frantically.

Harry shook his head. Upstairs? Unprotected from the mass? It was impossible, a suicide mission—

“Master Harry!” Hani urged again. She tugged his arm with a surprising burst of strength, forcing him to his feet, the book tumbling carelessly to the floor, barely missing the puddle of his upturned tea, scraps of parchment with Hermione’s notes scattering out around him. He watched one float dangerously close to the fire, swaying through the air nearer and nearer and—

Something seemed to click in him, and he rushed to pull it to safety, protecting the evidence of his future, his last connection to his friends. He looked down at the scrap—it doesn't mean you aren't to feel at all—and back to Hani.

“I have to go up there,” he said hoarsely, because it was speak or puke and he had already made enough of a mess.

Hani nodded, her lip quivering. “Master Harry has planned to…”

He took another step and found his legs were shaking. He took another. A few more. He managed to pick up the book and the rest of Hermione’s notes. Another elf had already collected the shattered teacup.

“Master Harry is leaving his bag,” said Hani, when he’d stared at it blankly for a moment too long, trying to remember why he had looked at it in the first place, trying to forget the magic… “Hani will bring it to him later. Master Harry is going upstairs…”
Harry wasn’t able to do much more than nod as he set the book carefully on the chair. Hani grabbed his hand and tugged him along after her, and after that, the halls were a blur, the portraits’ concerned sounds merging into one distant roar, and then Hani was pushing Harry through an empty doorway with a frantic whisper: “Master Harry is having courage!”

Harry managed to stagger to the empty seat a few steps away without turning any heads. The students on the floor were still milling about, the choppy waters slow to settle after a whirlpool ended, the last of the upper years dawdling to find their seats at the four house tables. Harry found himself seated above them, next to Slughorn at the staff table. His vision was turning too much to see if any of the faces were looking his way, and even if he had found any he was struggling to remember to breathe with all the magic...

“Nervous?” Slughorn asked when he turned to Harry and found him shaking and pale. Harry registered that he was being spoken to and managed a nod, which only made Slughorn peer closer. “Nothing to be scared of, m’boy. They’re just students, like you.”

“Jus’ a lot,” he said. He hoped he said. His tongue felt foreign in his mouth, an alien chunk of flesh no different from the lump thickening in his throat.

Slughorn frowned some more, then grabbed his goblet and fiddled with it for a moment. Harry lost track of what he was doing until it was pressed into his hand. “Calming draught,” he heard Slughorn explaining—to him? “Keep some on hand every year, for the firsties, you know…”

Somehow, Harry managed to drink it without sloshing liquid down his robes. The effect was instantaneous: for a moment the new magic burned brightly within him, but then it twisted and there seemed to be something cool spreading out from his chest, washing over him with a pleasant numbness. His breathing deepened and slowed to a normal pace, his heart regained a steady rhythm, and while there was still simply far too much magic in the room to comprehend, he just couldn’t bring himself to care anymore. The water molecules had returned to being an ocean, and he was drifting in it.

“Thanks,” he managed to slur out as his vision cleared. He felt strange, like he was floating through a memory as an outside observer, but that was more present than he had been a moment before. When he put the cup down on the table he stared with little concern, realizing his fingers had gone colder than the metal they held.

Slughorn just chuckled. "You are welcome, Mister Harrigan. I imagine this is rather more students than you are used to? Don’t worry. You will settle soon enough."

"I hope so," Harry agreed. He felt a magic reaching out towards him and turned to see Professor Notaro on Slughorn's other side, gazing back at him with concern. He smiled. Professor Notaro was nice, to be worried about him. Like a Grandma. Did he have a Grandma? He didn’t think he did, so maybe she could—

Then the doors to the Great Hall opened again, and Professor McGonagall led the first year students in. If Harry had thought the students already gathered were bad, then the first years were truly horrific, their magic completely unrestrained, sparking like broken cables still coursing with electricity, little bursts of power that seemed to hit Harry like hail pelting into bare skin. Even through the strange haze of the calming potion, it was like a limb had fallen asleep and was prickling at having to work again. He shuddered. He knew he would be spending the year trying to avoid them. Little monsters.

As McGonagall led her flock to stand before the raised platform the sorting hat waited on, the rest of the hall fell silent. That was something of a relief—Harry hadn’t realized how much the noise felt
like it was battering through his ears into his skull, just as he hadn’t realized the thousands of candles floating in the ceiling were the source of that awful shining in his eyes. He struggled not to shield himself from the light, tilting his head down as subtly as he could—and then the Sorting Hat was singing, and Harry had that burst of magic to deal with—and each time it was placed onto a student's head he could feel the ancient spells at work, and some of them skipped by him on their way towards Slytherin table, and—

Harry registered that Dumbledore had called his name, but not before the entire hall had turned its attention onto him.

Slughorn elbowed Harry in the ribs, and he stood quickly, the scrape of his chair stark against the quiet of the hall, the hissing whispers and mumbling and titters of laughter. The calming potions seemed to have gotten rid of the shakes in his legs, and it felt like he was floating as he made his way towards the stool. It seemed far too small beneath him. There was more laughter as he tried to find a way to fold his legs to sit straight and nearly knocked himself over. His eyes darted out among the students, trying to find the source of the sound—

—and as the hat descended over his eyes, the face his gaze landed on was unmistakably that of James Potter.

Shit.

Shit!

There was silence for a moment. Absolute, perfect, blessed silence, like the hall beyond the hat had disappeared entirely. It would have been strange, alone in the dark as he was, but he wasn’t really alone, and after a long pause, the hat said:

“Well, I haven't been greeted like that in a long time.”

Harry resisted the urge to crane his neck about to follow the voice; he wouldn't find it. He could feel the way the hat was rummaging about in his head. Its magic was settling around him and… through him. It felt like legilimency, without the pain.

“Yes… I suppose it would. Mostly, eleven-year-olds haven't experienced that sort of thing, but from your memories... you have been through a lot, haven't you.”

Not to be rude, Harry thought, and the hat chuckled—there was no need to demur when it could read his intentions. But I've realized something terrible.

“I can't be in Gryffindor. Not with my dad there. And my mum. And Remus, and Sirius, and Pettigrew —

“That would probably derail your plans, yes, but it is your house… Ah, but what do I know? I am just a hat. This is beyond me.”

Beyond you?

“I exist for the chief purpose of sorting eleven-year-olds into houses based on potential and character. You are not eleven, and you have… much more conflict than potential and character.”

Harry’s thoughts drifted back towards his first sorting, even as his mind was running through the
absolute catastrophe this whole affair had become. His parents… oh, Merlin, if he spoke to him—

“Oh, here we are. Gryffindor or Slytherin? Yes, I can see it.”

_Not Slytherin_, an eleven-year-old boy had insisted. _Not Gryffindor_, Harry thought in fresh panic.

“Of course not. The Slytherins would eat you alive, to borrow the phrase. And not Gryffindor, either… tricky…”

That left Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. Neither had ever really seemed like viable options for Harry.

“You are not naturally suited to either, no. But I suppose that it is the only way to preserve you, until you find your way back… Time travel! This is ridiculous. And… oh, my… what is this?”

Harry sat up straighter. A psychic hat finding something in his head troubling was definitely not a good sign.

“Humans are not…. typically capable of… sensing magic, as you refer to it. There is something… missing from this head of yours. Something absent. Your own magic is reaching out—yes, you have seen it in other people, that ‘curiosity’, yes, but this is far more than that… would I could show you, but I am just a hat.”

Something missing? Absent? Well, Harry imagined that would be his proper place in time. There was a sense of belonging that he could not expect to find, displaced as he was, and it was somewhat comforting to find his magic was seeking as desperately for a way back as the rest of him was. Even if the result was somewhat debilitating.

“Still, we must sort you… Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff? Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw? It is but a matter of preference at this point, as this sorting is but a sham.”

Harry pulled his mind away from the magic sensing conundrum and tried to think on what made those two houses what they were. From Ravenclaw, there was Luna, who he rather liked, but also Cho, who was… well, when he’d left they’d not been speaking, after Marietta had snitched on the DA. But in Hufflepuff, there had been Cedric Diggory… Cedric, who had been so close to winning glory for his house, only for Harry and Voldemort to muck it all up…

The hat laughed. It was a horrible sound, and Harry wondered if everyone in the Hall could hear it, and what they would think of it, or if the Hat kept this secret like it must so many things big and small. For a moment, he wished he could turn the connection around, and get into its head—but it was a magical object. Did it even have a mind?

“A Hufflepuff winning glory? Oh, child; it is clear you are no Hufflepuff. A Hufflepuff never wins glory, she earns it.”

Earns…? But it had been a tournament. You don’t ‘earn’ a tournament, you ‘win’ it. Or you ‘lose’ it, or ‘tie’ it—

“Yes, you are much more suited for Ravenclaw. She will help you in your quest, at least. Shame, though, to know the fate of a boy before I sort him…”

Harry nearly jumped up off the stool in alarm, and it was only at the last moment he remembered not to shout out his protests. _You can’t warn him! You can’t tell any of them. If my past is changed…_

His thoughts echoed with that first day, so long ago, when Dumbledore had made his strange explanations of the troubles of time travel… they made much more sense to Harry now…
“My job is to sort, not to meddle with fate. And the magic on me is to sort without bias,” the Hat replied stiffly. But it paused, and relented: “You do rather seem an exception. Still, I’d argue your logic is flawed.”

Flawed?

“Well, if I am to put you into Ravenclaw, you will figure it out soon enough.”

What? Wait—

“RAVENCLAW!”

Chapter End Notes

Hi, all! This chapter wraps up Harry’s summer. Starting next chapter, we’re going to be meeting some new characters and plots, and Harry is going to finally be doing more than wasting away in the library. Well, a bit more.... he is now a Ravenclaw, after all.

Thank you for your kudos and reviews--they cheer up this poor author's soul as I struggle along with chapter twenty-one. Editing way back at the beginning at least gives me a chance to enjoy Harry while he is young and innocent... poor dear...

Cheers!
**Noninvolvement Policy**

Chapter by noaacat, thenoacat (noaacat)

Chapter Summary

It's autumn semester, 1976, and Harry's doing his absolute best to stay out of everyone's way.

'Look at me now, Uncle Vernon,' he caught himself thinking when he realized he’d gone a whole weekend without saying a word to anyone but Hani. 'I'll be in the library, making no noise and pretending I’m not there.'

Luckily for Harry, the best-laid plans are often trampled on by basic human interaction, here to save his lonely soul. Harry finally talks with a few new faces, and a few old.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seventies or nineties, there were some things that were indelibly the same at Hogwarts no matter the era.

It was bewildering, at first, how very similar Hogwarts was to how Harry knew it. Sure, a few of the teachers were younger or different faces, and the students were on the individual level an entirely different body, but they wore the same uniform and followed the same paths to the same classrooms with the same house rivalries causing trouble in the same halls. If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend that Hermione was off in the library and Ron was out on the quidditch pitch, and then nothing had really changed at all.

They weren’t, though. The twenty years’ distance between them was easier to bear if he didn’t let himself fall into flights of fancy.

But beyond the bubble Harry folded himself in, life at Hogwarts went on. October passed much as September did, which is to say: slowly. The fifth year students of autumn, 1975, were nonetheless at a loss for time between OWL preparations, quidditch, and the raging prank war between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff that broke only for brief alliances against the Slytherins. In November, The gossip chains were rattled with the minor scandal that a sixth year and a third year were dating, but tides quickly shifted when two seventh-year girls announced their intention to marry after graduation, ministry laws be damned. What was upsetting to the students, no stranger to same-sex relationships no matter what the minister tried to pretend, was that one girl was a Gryffindor and the other a Slytherin. They marched through Hogwarts with hands held tight and heads held high, mocking their housemates’ horror and taking shelter among the Hufflepuffs, who found the girls’ ostracization more offensive than the reasons for it.

Harry, like the rest of the Ravenclaws, watched the proceedings with bemused distance. It was peculiar to watch the Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalry with no part in the proceedings. As a rule, of course, he still found the Slytherins an unpleasant lot (especially considering how many names he recognized as future Death Eaters), but as a Ravenclaw non-entity, he went largely under the radar… both for the feuding houses and his newfound refuge.
Of course he still had his Gryffindor pride, but Harry had to admit his new placement had its advantages. It was easy to pass himself off as a bland, quiet student, providing just enough information to his housemates to quench their thirst for knowledge and paint himself as without character. He even avoided the mistakes that other new students demonstrated—falling into trick steps, losing track of moving classrooms, and the like—and never sought to engage any of the others in a way that would put him in their thoughts.

It was as deliberately calculated as Harry had ever been, and it was all for the sake of not affecting any of his classmates’ lives too drastically. He woke up early, took breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the kitchens rather than the Great Hall, rarely spoke in class, and found a dusty corner in the library to claim as his own, where he spent long hours pouring over books for any clues to time magic or, when he needed a break from that, even revising and doing his homework of his own initiative, just to fill the time. He didn’t think he was much of a Ravenclaw, though he’d never been more on top of his schoolwork in his life, but if he timed his return to Ravenclaw Tower right, he could slip into the common room behind another group of students and not even have to answer riddles at the brass door-knocker in the shape of an eagle that guarded the entrance. To his housemates, he had successfully become something of a ghost. The novelty of a transfer student had quickly faded into the background of Hogwarts’ regular drama.

*Look at me now, Uncle Vernon,* he caught himself thinking when he realized he’d gone a whole weekend without saying a word to anyone but Hani. *I’ll be in the library, making no noise and pretending I’m not there.*

Well, he learned to make small talk when he absolutely needed human interaction to make sure his head was still in place, but after five years together Harry’s classmates already had their cliques and habits. The Ravenclaws were a naturally curious lot, but of the houses, they were the most devoted to their OWLs, and he couldn’t fault any of them not going out of their way for a boy who seemed happy enough avoiding them.

And there weren’t exactly droves of them to talk to in the first place. There were five Ravenclaw girls Harry’s year, and only one other boy. Hector Smithe, Harry’s inevitable roommate, was fast friends with a girl their year named Pandora Moone. Harry was was almost certain Pandora was Luna Lovegood’s mother: she had white-blond hair, a dreamy look, and the other Ravenclaw girls did not seem to know how to approach her. Those four formed the sort of group that split into different pairs with each petty argument and stitched itself back together time and time again. Harry did not fit easily into these patterns. Nor did he fit in with any of the other houses’ students.

To Harry, the arrangement was optimal. Lonely? Yes. But as an invisible outsider, no one paid his library table piled with books too much attention, and he did not risk upsetting anyone else’s lives.

Hani, of course, worried.

“Master Harry is never having any friends if he be speaking only with elves!”

“I have a friend, Hani. You.”

“Hani is an elf,” she said, drawing it out like Harry was a bit slow on the uptake, but she pulled her long ears in front of her face to hide a pleased smile. “Master Harry is needing real, human friends… witches and wizards like he is being…”

“I have it on good authority that witches and wizards are overrated,” he drawled loftily, affecting a pompous accent as he settled into the wooden chair that was now a permanent fixture beside the large fireplace. “Why, if I could have it my way, I’d spend all my time among elves. Much better company.”
He lied mostly to comfort her, but truth be told, though he was lonely he had little time to dwell on it. Harry was lucky to have covered most of the class materials once already, because the professors of 1975 were just as eager to assign ridiculous amounts of homework as they were in 1996. Several of the assignments McGonagall and Flitwick tasked them with were clones of ones he had already completed once, and as pretty much all of it was review Harry could rush through his homework and get much better marks than he had the first time around—even in Potions, where he had always struggled. He expected that Slughorn being the one marking Harry’s work was the main reason for his improvement there, as Snape had never given Harry a fair chance.

Speaking of Snape, Harry had discovered that he had landed not only in the same era, but the exact same year as Snape, Lily Evans, and the Marauders were set to take their OWLs. Going on four months he’d managed not to say a single word to any of them, but he couldn’t resist watching, catching himself dogging their footsteps to catch the sound of his father’s voice or his mother’s laughter. Even as the memory he’d witnessed lingered at the edges of his mind, reminding Harry that he should be as skeptical of his parents as he tended to be of Snape, he couldn’t resist for once learning about them in person rather than through the rosy-eyed stories woven from other people’s memories.

As far as Harry could tell, the Marauders made up the frontlines of the Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalry. If a fight broke out in the school, the four Gryffindor boys were probably involved in it. They rarely got caught, of course; mostly they seemed to fill the same shoes that Fred and George did—and their pranks were generally harmless and funny. Once, they’d managed to charm the cutlery to go limp when anyone picked it up, making for a most bizarre dinner.

Or so Harry had heard. He had also heard the house elves grumbling about the hassle as they struggled to wash the dishes later that evening, which was about when Harry had regained his ability to think straight. The spell, harmless though it may have been, had also let off a magic wave of magic when it deployed. Harry hadn’t stood a chance.

The magic sensing was… a continued struggle, to say the least.

Harry had spent several nights from the beginning of term forcing himself to meditate, or something like it, trying to sort through the mess of students twisting his overloaded brain into knots, but it had taken him weeks to discover a more practical method of keeping his head when spells started flying in class. It was fairly simple, really. One by one, he learned to recognize and identify his classmate’s magic, until when a spell was close to him and Harry was caught off guard he could distract himself by focusing on a familiar body of magic instead. It was what he had done with Hani and the wards, in essence, only he had to be quick about recognizing how much he could handle and finding someone to focus on before he zoned out or gave himself a massive headache.

He learned Hector’s magic first. The boys’ shared dorm meant Harry could comfortably study him at night, and as they shared every class except Runes and Hector’s extra electives, Hector was usually enough. He wasn’t too powerful, and he had a strangely constrained sort of magic, focused to whatever purpose he put it to, so Harry didn’t risk getting overwhelmed by it. It did have the tendency to… burble when Hector got emotional, and once Harry recognized that he realized that his roommate had an impressive gift for presenting a laid-back exterior to cover any upsets, but even that was minor. He simply didn’t have enough magic for it to grate on Harry’s nerves the way some of the students did.

Soon enough, however, Harry could recognize everyone in his house by their magic alone, even though he couldn’t remember all their names or faces. After that, he set about becoming comfortable with the other houses fifth years, but that was a slower process. And for the amount of time learning them required, it didn’t seem particularly effective in making the weight of the several hundred
magical bodies inhabiting Hogwarts any lighter. But it did make the task of trying to stay focussed in classes and busy hallways when he could keep his mind busy actively rationalizing what he was sensing.

His classmates would never guess how well the quiet transfer student knew them. And it wasn’t just their magic that Harry caught himself observing, either. The Marauders would never know that Harry had overheard them discussing Lupin’s ‘condition’ twice, or that he was learning the hand signals they used to talk across boring classes. Lily Evans would never know that Harry had spied her and Snape— Snape! —sharing a table in the library, or that her magic was curious and always reaching out to brush the world around her the same way that Slughorn’s and Dumbledore’s did. Snape would never know that Harry had seen the way he scowled at his housemate’s backs when they made some inane comment and celebrated their own wit.

He was studying them in a way he couldn’t claim to have studied anyone else, but despite all the watching he’d done, Harry was disheartened when he realized he would never know whether he would actually get along with any of them. The only words they ever shared were pleasantries, page numbers, and half-hearted classroom discussions. He didn’t want to speak to them, not really, not knowing what was at stake every time he interrupted the natural flow of their lives, but still. There he was, surrounded by people, and lonely.

Resigned his fate as Harry was, it came as a surprise when one morning Hector grabbed him on the way out the door and practically frog-marched Harry down the stairs for breakfast in the Great Hall. Early in the morning and late in the term as it was, Harry’s brain was short on cells to spare for finding a way to excuse himself from having breakfast with the rest of the house on such short order. Unless he wanted to give away his well-kept secrets, that was, or risk upsetting Hector and disturbing the other boy’s day any further.

So there Harry was. It was the second week of December, the last week of term, but the first time Harry had entered the Great Hall for breakfast since the year had started. Hector pushed him into the seat across from Pandora at the very end of Ravenclaw table, and reluctantly, Harry resigned himself to this new fate. He just hoped Hani wouldn’t worry.

“Good morning, Harrigan,” the blond witch greeted Harry, seeming unsurprised by her presence as she tucked a ribbon to mark the place in her book and set it aside.

“Good morning, um, Moone,” he replied.

Harry liked Pandora, as far as he could tell. He’d never heard her say anything negative about anything, regardless of how they spoke of her, and when she chose she could affect that sort of elegance that only a handful of the most proper purebloods ever seemed to manage—and she wore it with much more grace than her Slytherin counterparts.

That wasn’t to say she was a classically composed beauty, though. Today, her hair was tied up in a loose bun, a long strip of blue-and-bronze striped silk serving as a headband to keep stray strands from falling into her face, the longer ends trailing down her neck. Harry wouldn’t normally have noticed something like that, but sticking out from the bun were two fresh quills and a stick of birch with two golden-orange leaves still hanging from it. Where the branch had come from, Harry couldn’t fathom; the leaves around Hogwarts had stopped falling weeks ago.
And by most measures, Pandora was Hector’s opposite. In appearance, Hector was incredibly tidy. Though if James and Sirius were anything to go by the fashion of the day seemed to be for boys to wear their hair long and disorderly, Hector’s fell no longer than his eyebrows, and though it was as thick and unruly as Harry’s when he stumbled out of bed, Harry had yet to see Hector leave the dorm with a single strand out of place. Hector was also half Indian—on his mother’s side, from the picture on his side table—and from her had inherited a somewhat dark complexion, offset by gold-flecked hazel eyes that fixed whoever he spoke to with a wide, unabashed stare throughout the whole of their conversations. Hector was taller than Harry but shorter than Pandora and had broad shoulders that made him look stockier than he really was, especially when he walked alongside his willowy friend.

More telling, however, was the difference in their personalities. Hector was not loud, per say, but he was known to derail classes by starting debates over any topic. Pandora, on the other hand, had that poise that might come off as aloof if not for her tendency of sharing observations truthfully no matter what they concerned. She was also known to occasionally turn in tests and homework where she had drawn the answers rather than written them. No one seemed to know what to make of those, but the professors had apparently worked out some sort of standard for grading them... or perhaps they simply given up on swaying her to more conventional approaches. As far as Harry knew, no one had ever asked Pandora what she meant by it, either. She was like Luna in that sense, generally misunderstood without people really trying to make sense of her. Pandora had Hector, at least, and the two were rarely seen apart.

“Call me Pandora,” she told Harry. “Apparently one of the Gryffindors goes by ‘Mooney’, even though that isn’t his name. It does get rather confusing.”

“Allright,” he said. “Then call me Harry.”

“I’ll call you Dudley the Dunce if you don’t start eating,” Hector said mildly, grabbing Harry’s plate to spoon a generous serving of scrambled eggs onto it. It reminded Harry so much of something Hermione would do—without the insult, generally, in her case—that Harry just stared at the plate as it was set back down in front of him.

“...okay,” he said, bemused, when he realized he should probably respond. “But I won’t respond to that. I have some dignity. I think..”

“Hector was worried, you know,” Pandora said, watching as Harry snagged three thick slabs of bacon off a large dish between them and fit them onto his plate beside the eggs. It had been a while since Harry had served himself food, really, as Hani was so fond of setting out excessive multi-course meals for him.

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“Worried? Feh,” said Hector, shoving a chunk of toast into his mouth.

“Yes, worried,” she repeated. “And I think he was quite right to. We never see you at meals, Harry, and exams are today. You can’t go into exams on an empty stomach. Everyone knows that.”

“It’s not like I’m not eating,” Harry said with a laugh, seeing the problem. “I just don’t like the Great Hall. There’s so many people here. It’s ridiculous.”

“Oh, right. You went to a smaller school, didn’t you?” Hector asked.

Harry chewed a bite of eggs slowly to buy him some time. He and Hector had barely spoken, even as roommates, but Harry had to be careful whenever people asked about his past. He didn’t want to contradict his own stories with carelessly added details. “Yes. I only ever saw a handful of people. The Professor, mostly, and a few of his other students.”
Pandora tilted her head, a few of the loose strands falling entirely out of the bun and making giving her updo an additional level of unbalance. “You wouldn’t strike me as the sort for personal tutors,” she said. “It’s mostly the old families holding out against sending their children to Hogwarts, and even those are beginning to sway, since so many of them already have ancestral alumni. We’re up to a sixty percent attendance rate, you know.”

Harry shrugged. “My aunt and uncle weren’t really keen on sending me off to some boarding school.” Understatement of the century, that, but Harry wasn’t about to bring up the house on a rock in the ocean that his Uncle had dragged them off to trying to escape Hogwarts' reach. “It was more of a… what did Dumbledore call it… a coven , that the Professor was part of? No blood politics there, as far as I know. But I wasn’t really a part of that group, either.”

Hector scratched his chin, his elbow jostling Harry’s arm. It was strange to sit this close to someone after all this time; even in the classrooms with bench desks, there was usually space to spread out.

“Well, I suppose this is all very different for you, then. All the homework and exams piling up, and whatnot. But it’s not worth risking your health for term exams, you know, Harry,” Hector said. “Revising only does so much. It’s more important to get proper sleep, and like Pan said, everyone knows not to go into an exam on an empty stomach. I guarantee the library doesn’t have bacon.”

Harry frowned. “No, er, I don’t think it does, but I think maybe you’ve got me mixed up with someone else, though? I haven’t been revising… actually, I should probably review something, before the tests…”

“Not been revising!” Hector scoffed. “Oh, come on. You’ve been getting near top marks in all our classes, and everyone’s seen you in the library, slaving away, hardly coming out to eat, never in clubs or the common room…”

“What?” Harry couldn’t help but laugh. That sounded like Hector was describing Hermione, not him. Ron would think he’d gone ‘round the bend, if he heard that. “I’ve not been—look, I’ve been through most of what we’ve covered in classes already. Honest, I haven’t been worrying about the term tests at all. The only marks I’m really concerned about are the OWLs.”

“...ooh,” said Hector, dragging it out and jabbing the air with a sausage impaled on his fork. “So you’re one of those.”

“Those?”

“A Slytherin-Ravenclaw,” Hector said. As though that explained anything.

“Hector’s got theories ,” Pandora warned Harry, smiling indulgently at her friend. “He likes to put people in boxes. I quite disagree, just so you know.”

“Boxes?”

Hector smiled too, lighting up the way he did when he found a point to contest in a Professor’s lecture. “Well, we had thought you were put into Ravenclaw because you were so class-focused. A classic Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw. We usually get a few of them—not the NEWT-overachievers, mind; they usually get sorted into Slytherin, ‘ambition’ and all that. Or Gryffindor, if they’re pushing themselves to the limit of academic insanity. No, I mean the ones who get perfect marks on bookwork and theory and homework, all year round.”

He paused, taking a bite out of the sausage and chewing it slowly, glancing in either direction down the table until he found the four others from their year. “Cat Sanchez,” he decided slowly, nodding
his head as if to select her from the group. “She’s one. She’s taken over running the OWL revision group I set up just by being there—not that I mind—and I don’t think she’s gotten a test score less than perfect in five years.”

“I’m definitely not that,” Harry laughed. Yes, that sounded more like Hermione than Harry would ever be, no matter how Ravenclaw he became.

“So, you’re one of them that beats the system,” Hector concluded.

“Beats the system?”

Pandora took over. “Hector says it’s the Slytherin-sided Ravenclaw,” she said dryly. She clearly didn’t believe a word of it.

“You’ve lost me,” said Harry.

“The overachievers are the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaws, all hard work and that sort of thing,” Hector explained. “The system-beaters are the Slytherin-Ravenclaws. Think Mandy Martins. She always figures out how to do the least amount of work to the best results. I don’t think she’s ever turned in a full-length essay, but they can’t exactly mark her down when she’s included all the relevant points.”

“You think I’m like that?”

“You said you only thought about OWLs. Since our regular grades don’t count for anything in the long run… thinking like that is as crafty as it comes.”

“Um,” said Harry.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Hector said quickly.

“Right,” said Harry.

“I mean it! It’s efficient. What’s the use worrying about term grades when you can put everything you’ve got to the OWLs and get actual, meaningful results? I’m not trying to insult you—”

“Hector,” Pandora cut in, laughing. “He’s not insulted. He just disagrees.”

Hector frowned, but Harry nodded, relieved she had been the one to say it. “I think you might be… reading a bit too much into this. And… I don’t care about OWLs—well, I mean, I do, just not that much. School and grades and all have never really been my thing.”

Hector’s frown deepened. “But you’re getting the marks—and you’re always shutting—”

“Hector,” Pandora said again, exasperated. “I told you: he’s fine.”

Harry looked back and forth between them, toast forgotten inches from his mouth. “I… think maybe I’ve missed something?”

“You are fine,” Pandora repeated.

“Uh… well, yeah, basically.”

“You are not, and I quote, ‘neglecting your well-being and chance at living your life for the sake of an arbitrary system of measuring self-worth’.”

Harry opened his mouth, but he wasn’t really sure what to say to that.
“I do not sound like that,” Hector said hotly.

“Wait,” said Harry, catching up. “Were you… actually worried about me? As in, ‘worried’ worried?”

“Ug,” said Hector eloquently.

“That’s… I mean, that’s nice. Dunno what I did to deserve it, but, yeah, I’m fine. Really. Thank you, I think…”

“Can we stop talking about this?” Hector asked. “Let’s go back to the part where you don’t care about OWLs?”

“I mean, they’re important, I guess,” said Harry. “But I’m not really the type to spend all my time on that.”

“Then what are you working on? You’re pretty much always reading, whenever I see you…”

Harry shrugged. “Personal research. The library here is really extensive, you know; I didn’t have anything like it before. You can find books on basically anything magical.”

“Well, yeah, some—but come on, you mean you’ve just been reading whatever catches your fancy?”

That was probably the best thing to let them believe. “One book leads to another, and all that. Plus, I am trying to catch up to everyone else in Runes. I’d like to try to take it NEWT level, but I just started this year, so…”

“Huh,” said Hector. “Well, I suppose you’re more like me, then.”

Harry looked between the two of them. Pandora was arranging the food on her plate into a peace symbol, apparently having lost interest in the conversation. “How do you mean?”

“Generally curious, charging into our interests rather than things anyone else might think is useful,” said Hector. “Oh, and the word ‘nerd’ might come to mind, if you’re one for muggle slang.”

“You think… you think I’m a nerd? Isn’t that kind of a rude thing to say?”

“You have to own it,” Pandora advised, training her bacon into a perfect curve. “It’s only rude if you take insult.”

“I don’t think it works that way…”

“No, Pandora’s right, sorry,” said Hector. The impatience that had fueled so many of their classes into debate was rearing its argumentative head, so Harry let the point slide. “But, anyways, that makes us ‘Gryffindor’-type Ravenclaws, by process of elimination.”

“Right.” He didn’t mind being considered a ‘Gryffindor-Ravenclaw’, since he technically already was, but Harry wasn’t sure he even wanted to understand what Hector meant by it. “And… Pandora?”

The boys considered her. Her gray eyes blinked owlishly back.

“Ravenclaw-Ravenclaw,” Hector decided.

“Isn’t that just ‘Ravenclaw’?” Harry asked.
“No. It’s Ravenclaw squared. Unless ‘Ravenclaw’ is equal to one, but I doubt that…”

“Ravenclaw is equal to the collective sum of the House, past, present, and future,” Pandora said. She’d been just as doubtful as Harry was about Hector’s classifications—more, even, since she’d already had her opinion set—but now she spoke as though her words were absolute facts. “Which cannot be summed up in a single number, as the total of the House includes our minds and imagination, and therefore is best described as infinity.”

“Alright,” said Hector. “So it’s Ravenclaw-Ravenclaw, not just Ravenclaw, because it is not one.”

“Infinity multiplied by infinity is still infinity,” Pandora countered. “So just ‘Ravenclaw’ should suffice.”

“No way. First, it will be an infinitely larger infinity, and second, infinity is a concept, not a number, and even so—”

Harry quickly gave up trying to follow the ensuing debate and focused on his meal. He had to admit it was a relief to have a proper conversation, for once, even if he was somewhat lost, but he knew come lunch he would be returning to the kitchens.

Maybe under different circumstances he would have become friends with them. But if his suspicions about Pandora being Luna’s mother were right (and unless she had a very similar sibling, they had to be) spending any more time that necessary with these two would not only be endangering his own future, but also Luna’s. If something happened to Pandora that changed the circumstances of Luna’s birth or childhood… Harry did not want to be responsible for that.

So he listened as their chatter turned to the upcoming exams without contributing anything novel, and responded to their light questions regarding his final papers with even lighter answers. Around him, he could feel the other students filling the Great Hall, and hoped he could simply blur into the background noise and be forgotten again entirely.

It seemed that sleepiness affected magic, as the press of it that morning did not seem so harsh as it had at the feast. Still, it wasn’t exactly a pleasant sensation, and he finished his breakfast quickly, intending to excuse himself to hide in the library until Potions. Before he could escape, however, an owl dropped down with a letter for Pandora, cutting their steady conversation into silence in a heartbeat.

Getting all of his interaction with people second-hand seemed to have given Harry some bad habits. He saw the way Pandora and Hector exchanged pointed glances as she slid her finger through the wax, and he couldn’t help but see the chance to figure out what was behind such a look. It wasn’t his business, precisely, but… Curiosity stayed Harry’s escape.

She folded it up a few moments later with a sigh. “Father’s called me home for the holidays. There’s been some trouble with cousin Alpheus…”

Hector’s shoulder’s tensed. “That sort of trouble?” His voice was low. Pandora nodded, and Hector deflated with a sigh.

Harry looked between them, but he felt it wasn’t his place to ask. “You were planning to remain in the castle?” he questioned instead.

Pandora tucked the envelope away in her robes, and picked up her fork and knife, cutting apart the peace symbol she’d arranged on her plate. “I’m afraid Father is usually too busy over the holidays to warrant going home,” she said lightly. “There are all sorts of social functions to consider, and while I
am welcome to attend, I’m afraid I have the unfortunate tendency to make rather poor impressions on
our hosts.”

Harry was confused, but Pandora didn’t explain, studying the piece of bacon she’d captured on her
fork. “I suppose it is to be expected, though,” she went on. “He is rather politically involved, and
with trouble afoot, he will want me at home. I will have to refresh my party etiquette.”

“Politically involved?” Harry questioned, before he caught himself.

Pandora looked up at him, surprised. “Oh… but I would think you of all people would know what is
going on in the world…?”

“Yeah, it’s taboo at Hogwarts, but that’s only on account of the mixing of all sides,” Hector agreed.
“I would think, coming from a smaller school…”

Harry shifted in his seat, mentally berating himself for getting involved. “The others were in a coven,
and the Professor never really talked politics,” he said. “And my Aunt and Uncle were muggles, so I
never got news from them…”

“I know the feeling.” Hector leaned in a bit closer, lowering his voice, though he didn’t seem to
notice he was doing it. “My mum’s a muggle—if it weren’t for my dad, we wouldn’t know a thing.”
He glanced around and lowered his voice another step. “You should be careful, though. There’s
been a rise of violence against muggleborns… and those who support them.”

Pandora nodded, but she was still staring unseeingly at the bacon. “Alpheus was working on
legislation of muggle visitation rights to St Mungo’s…”

Hector sighed, slumping over to prop his chin on one hand. “…There’s going to be another delay,
then,” he grumbled. “I mean—you aren’t that close to Alpheus, are you? He’s from your mother’s
side? A Fawley?”

She shook her head, agreeing. “He’s the one who tried to convince father to find me a marriage
contract. We haven’t spoken directly since he called me an embarrassment to the family name. Still,
this is… rather upsetting to hear about, to say the least.” She sighed. “This isn’t the end of it, either.
There will be at least one funeral to plan before the year is out.”

Harry had known that things were bad in the seventies—Voldemort, against all rational possibility,
somehow rose into power, so things had to be bad—but to hear her so nonchalantly predict
someone’s death… Maybe Pandora was more like the Slytherin purebloods than he’d thought?

“I’m going to have to tell my mother,” Hector went on. “She’ll talk our ears off the whole holiday,
and dad’s going to get up in arms and they’re going to argue about wizarding politics. If the bill gets
delayed again, she’s not going to be able to visit him after his next surgery. You know how she gets
about that.”

Harry watched as, two tables over, Lily took a seat with her friend Mary, purposefully ignoring
James’ graceless invitations. It was easier to think of them that way—as Lily and James. They
weren’t his parents, not yet. But he wondered if she would give birth to him at St. Mungo’s, and
whether his grandparents would be allowed in, or even Aunt Petunia, if she wanted to be.

“Muggles can’t visit family in St. Mungo’s?”

Hector shrugged. “It’s… complicated. There’s a whole application process, and fees and processing,
and you have to have someone to escort you at specifically appointed times, and mostly by the time it
goes through it’s too late to matter, one way or another.”
Harry frowned. “That’s—”

But he caught himself, this time. As disgusting as he found that sort of blatant discrimination, he knew he shouldn’t voice his opinions or get involved. When he got back to the nineties, if the situation still hadn’t been fixed he could be as angry about it as he deserved—and maybe, just maybe, his voice as ‘Harry Potter’ would mean something. But here, he was ‘Dudley Harrigan’ for a reason, and he had to remain as bland a non-entity as possible.

“—not something I would have ever thought about,” he finished dully.

Hector and Pandora looked at each other, and back to him.

“That’s it?” Hector asked.

Harry had paused quite awkwardly. He shrugged, trying to be casual. “Well, this is the first I’ve heard about it. I’ll have to see if there’s any history to the policy in the library.” Then, because Hector was looking like he was about to launch into a lecture explaining all aspects, and because Pandora had her head tilted like a confused puppy, he gave in and added—"It does sound incredibly inefficient.”

Hector shut his mouth and turned back to his plate. “You can say that again,” he said, apparently willing to take the hint and let Harry’s non-opinion slide. At least for the moment. “Mum’s a muggle doctor, and an immigrant, and finds the whole thing infuriating. I think she wanted for the wizarding world to not have the same issues as the muggle one, when she found out about it, but instead she gets to be angry about two realms of politics instead of one. Only, since she’s a muggle no one really listens to her about wizarding things—except me and dad and a few of his friends, I mean.”

“A doctor? How did she meet your father? ...if you don’t mind me asking.”

Hector shrugged. “She came to England for medical school, kept running into him. They tell it like a big long Romeo and Juliet thing, of course. And your parents? What did they…?”

“I dunno, really,” Harry said with a shrug. “My relatives never really spoke of them.”

“Are you going to see them over the Holidays?”

“They’re dead,” Harry said shortly, hoping to cut off that line of inquiry. It was easier than stumbling through the whole story he and Dumbledore had come up with. “I’ll be staying here. And you?”

“Visiting my mother’s family in Delhi. Sorry to leave you here all alone.”

“I’m used to it,” Harry said. The conversation was twisting further and further into dangerously personal territory, so he stood. “I hope your cousin is, um, well, Pandora,” he said, standing from the seat. “See you two in Potions?”

~

Exams carried the students through the final days of the term in a rush, and on Thursday morning the majority of the students had packed their bags to return home for the holiday. As in the nineties, Harry was one of only a handful of students who remained in the castle for the two-and-a-half weeks they had free. He was looking forward to the peace and quiet.
Wishing Hector happy holidays, Harry slipped out of tower to avoid any more goodbyes. He had a walk around the grounds rather than join the other students for the late brunch the Great Hall offered, following a familiar loop down towards the lake and out by the quidditch pitch, the grass crackling with frost beneath his feet and his breath freezing into clouds. His nose stung, and he had to cast a warming charm on his cloak, but the sun was shining and Harry had hardly been out of the castle all term. He was going to take residence in the Library again as soon as the others had left, but for now, he was enjoying the fresh air.

The eleven o’clock bells were ringing as he came back up to the school, and the last of the students were leaving out through the courtyard. He moved off to the side to lean against the balustrade, watching, not wanting to push against the flow of bodies and baggage. He was in no hurry; he could wait.

“You’ll come visit us at the Potter’s place, right?” he heard a familiar voice ask, and looked to find the Marauders coming out through the wooden doorway. Sirius, dressed in ridiculously bright red bell-bottoms and a Beatles’ t-shirt, was walking backward while talking to Remus, who was much more sensible in his heavy school cloak and a Gryffindor red-and-gold striped scarf.

“I’ll probably be well enough for the New Year’s,” he said lowly, glancing around.

Harry quickly looked down to adjust the fastener of his cloak. He hoped they wouldn’t notice him. He knew it was slightly creepy, but… if there was anything good about this whole time travel fiasco, it was that he was getting to at least see and hear his parents, which was something he never thought he would be able to.

“Awesome,” Sirius said, grinning. “So if I swipe us a bottle of Firewhiskey, you’ll have to try it.”

“If dad lets me, I’ll try to come. But mum’s sister is visiting, you know, and I can’t just floo over to Godric’s Hollow whenever the fancy strikes…”

“Dad’s got access to a ministry car we could come pick you up in,” James said, reaching up to push his bangs out of his face, somehow managing to make his birds’ nest hair even worse.

“Oh, yeah, cause that wouldn’t be inconspicuous at all,” Remus drawled. “Last time, I swear, that pink Volkswagen? Ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous? No way—it’s a classic, Moony. And that wasn’t the ministry’s, it was our neighbor’s, and did I tell you about the time…”

They moved out of earshot, and no matter how much Harry wanted to go after them and hear the rest of the story about the pink Volkswagen, he had no excuse. Instead he headed inside and went down to the kitchens for a cup of tea.

The castle as empty as it was, Harry was able to focus much better than he had for months. There was still magic, but so much less—it was like his brain had been dredged of mud and his thoughts could finally flow freely. There was only one other Ravenclaw staying in the tower, and she was a second-year girl, so they never really saw each other. The only other students in the castle were a pair of Hufflepuff boys and Snape, and only about half of the staff had stayed on hand.
In the Great Hall, the long house tables had been stacked on either side. Harry didn’t mind eating with the others so much now that the crowds were gone, especially since it meant he could discuss runes with Professor Notaro, who had graded his final exam and decided to move him up a year in her class. Harry wasn’t sure he was ready, but she had been giving him advanced homework the whole semester and he’d yet to encounter anything that didn’t make sense on the first pass through. Since he had memorized the alphabets they were working with before the term had started, as the rest of the class was learning the basic rune-meanings he’d been studying each one in greater depth, and while the rest of the first-level class had only made half of a set of rune-stones over the term, he’d completed his. That was a full year’s worth of work, according to Notaro, and she advised him that mostly the second-level class was working with larger chunks of text with basic coding applied, like the journals Harry had started with over the summer. They wouldn’t be doing any active magics until OWL-level, which, if he moved up to second-level now, he would be set to begin the following year… but Harry was trying not to think about that, and instead to simply focus on Notaro’s advice for getting caught up.

They drifted into other topics, occasionally, but just as often Harry found himself comfortable enough in the quiet to read as he ate. He didn’t have to worry about the mass of students’ magics getting out of control, or the Marauders pulling any of their whole-school pranks. But even if he hadn’t been comfortable, Hani was willfully refusing to bring him any food when he came down to the kitchens. She insisted that he should at least spend his holidays with the other human residents of the castle, and Harry, seeing no reason to upset his house-elf friend, decided not to push it.

Along with the students, Dumbledore had vacated Hogwarts until the morning of the twenty-fifth, when everyone gathered for Christmas brunch. It was a quiet affair—if anyone among them really was Christian they did not mention it, choosing instead to just enjoy the food and listen to Slughorn go on about all the well-wishes and holiday cards he had gotten from former students who had gone on to do great things. Harry imagined he would be hearing a repeat of the conversation in class after break, so he only halfway paid attention, though the pair of Hufflepuff boys were hanging on to his every word as they tucked into the ham and eggs the house elves had cooked. Instead, Harry kept to himself, halfway tracking Professor Notaro’s discussion of some recent Transfiguration Today article with McGonagall and Dumbledore and halfway pacing his eating to not be done too soon and have to leave first. It was rather awkward to share so formal of a meal with the staff members.

Snape, at least, was either oblivious to the awkwardness or did not care either way. He ate without saying as single word to anyone else, and left as soon as his plate was emptied. Harry followed suit once the Slytherin was clear of the room, eager to retreat to the library—or, he tried to; Dumbledore stopped him, calling Harry over to ask him to take tea in his office that afternoon. Harry agreed, of course, though he worried that Dumbledore would want to know about how his time travel research was going. There was a simple answer to that: not well.

Foreseeing a disappointing conversation, Harry ached to get back to the library, where for the past week he had been pouring over the books, hoping to find something—anything—new. Before that, however, he followed the familiar path to the kitchens, to give the only Christmas present he was planning to that year. It was something he’d made: he’d found a smooth stone down at the edge of the lake and carved Hani’s name in it in runes, embedding it with magic that wouldn’t do anything beyond inhabit the stone but at least made it somewhat personal. Harry thought it was a bit cheesy, and had almost been too embarrassed to give it… but at the same time, he’d wanted to give Hani something, and since he’d arrived in the seventies with only what was in his trunk, money was, for the first time since he’d entered the wizarding world, something of an issue. So he sucked it up and wrapped the stone in a sheet of parchment, and hoped that Hani would at least appreciate the thought.

She did. When he explained what the runes meant, Hani had thrown her arms around him and
bawled in such a Dobby-like manner that Harry had been startled. She hadn’t let go of the stone even as she brought Harry some treacle tart and explained the poker tournament taking place on the hearth—a Christmas tradition among the elves, apparently, where they competed to take on more duties around the castle. Hani had never played poker before, so she sat with Harry, watching, but she told him some of the other elves had offered to teach her for the years to come, and she’d accepted.

Harry smiled. Hani always gave him grief about how he avoided the other human residents of the castle, but in truth, he had been worried that she didn’t seem to be settling in any more than he was. “You’ll have to teach me how to play, once you’ve gotten good,” he told her.

“Master Harry is not knowing already?”

“We mostly play exploding snap—is that a game, yet?”

Hani nodded. “Gryffindors be charring the tables in the tower,” she said. “Elves is thinking maybe the tables need be replaced with better spells, but Mistress McGonagall is saying they is antiques…”

Harry bit his cheek, trying not to laugh. Even after Hermione had gone on her S.P.E.W. crusade, they’d never truly considered the mess they made of the common room. Destroying antiques with a card game—that was exactly the sort of trouble they’d always gotten up to without a thought. He felt bad, now, but only because the house elves had to deal with it.

“That’s what we usually played. One of my roommates tried to teach the rest of us poker, but muggle cards don’t explode, so it’s less exciting. The others went back to snap pretty quickly.”

For some reason, his words inspired Hani to stand up, tugging him off the bench along with her. “Master Harry should not be learning cards from Hani,” she said. “There is being three other fifth-year boys in the castle for the holidays. Master Harry should be learning from them.”

“I doubt Snape knows how to play poker,” he protested, but Hani was undeterred.

“You is returning for New Year’s Eve, but Hani is not letting Master Harry back in until he bes talking with other students.” She pulled Harry along firmly, surprising him, as always, with the amount of strength her spindly arms possessed.

“They don’t want to talk to me,” Harry pointed out. “I ran into the other Ravenclaw on the way out of the tower yesterday, and she looked like she was going to cry when I said good morning.”

“Then Master Harry is learning how to be kind!” Hani exclaimed, and she pushed him out through the portrait hole and closed it loudly behind him.

Bemused, Harry returned to the library and poured over the books until it was time for tea—as signaled by the three o’clock bells that startled him up out of his seat. From behind her desk, Madam Pince narrowed her beady eyes at him as Harry hurried to return the books to their proper places on the shelves, as though she were just waiting for him to make a wrong move so she could assign him detention or get him banned. He waited until the door creaked shut behind him to start running, and when he reached the stone gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore’s office he swore the creature gave him a skeptical glance as he panted out "Peppermint Humbugs!” to be let in.
Dumbledore was waiting to open the door when he knocked. "Harry, come in, sit down. Biscuit?"

Harry shook his head, though he did accept a cup of tea and sit with it warming his palms, studying the room around him carefully. The office was shockingly similar to how Harry had seen it in the nineties, filled with strange instruments and the portraits of former headmasters dozing in the vaulted ceiling above them. As such, it was abuzz with magic peppering him from every direction. At least Dumbledore still had his magic contained—Harry focused on him, instead.

"So, Harry," the headmaster began when they were both settled. "The Professors have reported that you have been doing well in your classes. I am glad to hear that you are settling in."

"Well, I've already done most of the work once. It's mostly review, so far."

"Still. You were so convinced this summer that school was the least of your priorities that I had to wonder whether you would let it fall to the wayside."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He still wasn't convinced he should be there, especially since his research had continued to yield no results. "I didn't want to make trouble. I've been doing my best to stay out of anyone's way."

"I've noticed your absence from meals."

Looking over the rim of his teacup as he took a long sip, Harry tried to read Dumbledore's face through the steam fogging his glasses. It was an impossible task. Aside from the twinkle sometimes present in his eye and the riddles he spoke in, Dumbledore gave hardly any tells to his true opinions, no matter who he spoke to.

"It's easier to take them with Hani in the kitchens," Harry said slowly. "That way I don't have to watch what I am saying."

Dumbledore nodded. "I suppose it is good for you to have someone who understands your situation so fully, as I cannot speak with you regularly myself. However, I must admit that I am surprised you have shared so much about yourself with her. My concern over your potential to upset your timeline still stands, and I wouldn't expect someone who so values an elf's friendship would make the mistake of underestimating what effect even so small a creature could have on the world."

Harry took a deep breath, twisting the cup in his hands. Was he being chastised? Dumbledore didn't sound upset, but.... "She has promised me that she will keep what I tell her secret. And most of the others here don't even think about the elves. Besides, I'm... not entirely sure that I even need to be worried."

"Oh?" said Dumbledore, raising a bushy eyebrow. He lifted up his own teacup, one with a bizarre pattern like a Hawaiian-print tourist shirt. He'd loaded his tea up with so much sugar Harry wondered how he could drink it. "Do explain."

"I've been separating out the different records we have of people who have traveled through time and back again," Harry told him. "Most of them seem rather unreliable, but there's some with people who've ended up only a short, uh, time away. A few days, or hours, even. These are the ones that seem to be relatively supportable. We have historical records of wizards who could travel back like that intentionally, and devices like the Chinese water mirrors—they were like... bath-sized pensives, only they took you to the actual past, but they were all destroyed by Genghis Khan in his conquests. Or the Roman time turners."

"Ah, time turners," Dumbledore said, brightening. "I've actually seen one of those, in person. But
that was quite some time ago, at the International Experimental Charms Exhibition in Norway—they haven't held one since, oh, the fifties? A collector from... Latvia, I think it was, but he had been living in Norway—he showed it to me, although he would not dare to use it himself, or risk anyone else taking it from him."

"Really?" Harry said, nearly dropping his tea into his lap as he sat up in excitement. "Do you remember who it was? If I could get ahold of him and examine it, I could potentially reconstruct the magic and—"

But Dumbledore shook his head. "Alas, I never learned his name, and as I speak neither Latvian nor Norwegian, we did not maintain any sort of contact beyond the conference. But please, go on."

"Oh," said Harry. He slumped back into his seat. If he could find a Roman time turner, he didn't think it would matter whether the ancient artifact still functioned—examining it could lead to actual progress towards understanding where the time turners of the nineties had come from. He was certain they had to be related. To hear that one existed somewhere out there, or, at least, had existed... But beyond his reach...

He swallowed and turned his mind back to what he actually could tell. "Well, the thing about all these little instances of time travel that people have recorded over the centuries... no matter how far anyone traveled or what they did, every single person who traveled returned without having changed anything. If someone had died, the first time around, even if the traveler managed to save them from the sort of death they'd originally experienced, they still ended up dead in some other way. The circumstances were slightly different, but they were dead all the same. In one case, the traveler had actually tried to kill the person who had sent her back in time, but that person survived by a series of accidents on his part, and she was arrested for attempted murder. Of course, I'm not entirely certain that particular story is true... she did end up in the Janus Thickey ward... but there are others where things turned out the same."

He bit his lip, tilting his teacup this way and that so the liquid intersected the china at different angles. Talking about his research was different from actually doing it, so he had to collect his thoughts, to make sure he wasn't just dumping information on Dumbledore. "I've been working my way through the journal of a wizard who was stuck in a time loop," he decided to explain next. "He wrote that he'd experienced the same day seventeen times before he broke free of it, because he had kept falling into the same circumstances that sent him back to begin with. The only reason he didn't get sent back the last time around was that he'd fallen and hit his head, and ended up with a concussion, and was unconscious at the point time looped. He forgot that he had ever been sent back in time, and didn't remember until several days later, when he discovered a peculiar entry in his journal. Otherwise, the day he had experienced had the exact same results every single time. He wrote... one day he managed to catch a train he missed the other days, only to have to turn back as he'd left something at home, which had the same results as not leaving at all."

"Fascinating," said Dumbledore, carding his fingers through his beard. "Also rather disturbing, of course, as what you are suggesting implies a rather fatalistic view of the world..."

"I don't think so, sir. Especially in that journal—he still had, um, agency. I guess, it's just... if he hadn't travelled back in time, he couldn't have been experiencing what he was, so when he got to that point he couldn't not travel back in time, because he already had.

"And then there's the time turners—when people used them, they were actually existing in the same time and same world and everything twice. So, the first instance of them was doing exactly what had already been done, and the second couldn't interfere with that, or they would erase their own existence. It's not fatalistic, really, it's... there's only one path to follow, or they wouldn't exist at all.
Theoretically, at least. We don't exactly have trials proving this. Actually..." Harry frowned down at his tea, steeling himself to admit the most troublesome and terrifying part of his research. "There's not any proof that any of these stories are true. Only the traveler's word, or the old documents, translated over thousands of years."

"Again, fascinating. There are some other questions I consider, however. You mentioned that these people fell back only a number of hours?"

"Some of them, yeah. All of the ones that are at all verifiable."

"Then I'm afraid they might fall under different, shall we say, rules than your current adventure. Have you found any accounts of greater periods traveled?"

"There's a few... Madam Pince found a book added to the collection in 1898 that might have been an account, but it also might have been the notes for someone's novel, for all we know, because it's got these bits of dialogue and, well, reflections on different peoples' character that don't really sound like they belong in a true record. There's references to some other records in some of the books I've read, but... none of them are in the library here, and they're not exactly the sort of thing you'd find in a bookstore."

"Well, I may have a solution to that," Dumbledore said. He set down his cup and opened one of the drawers of his desk, withdrawing a black folder of papers and passing it to Harry. On the front was printed a small golden seal, a crowned dragon holding a book of runes contained inside a shield, and it was labeled underneath: OXFORD MAGICAL RESEARCH LIBRARY. Harry traced it with one finger, and looked back up at Dumbledore, tilting his head.

"There's a program the Oxford Research department funds to allow for non-alumni to make use of their collection," the headmaster explained. "There's is the largest collection in the country, and one of the largest in the world, especially for English texts. Although Professor Notaro informs me you have taken to translating Runes like they were your first language."

Harry flushed and flipped open the folder, not really having anything to say to that gross overstatement. The first page of the stack was a form to fill out.

"Now, usually this program is reserved for students pursuing their Mastery. But to be quite frank with you, Harry, when you are as old as I am you have connections who can pull some strings. As you are, by your Professors' accounts, a gifted young scholar, I am certain that you will at least qualify for admittance, if not a research scholarship. Beyond that, there is always work to be done maintaining the archive, so if you do not mind working for the Library, you should be able to afford it."

Harry looked up again, unsure what to make of Dumbledore's proposal. "A research scholarship? Me? Does that... does that mean they're going to expect to see the results of my research? A paper, or something?"

"The research that is done at the OMRL will often take years to complete, my boy," he said, his beard twitching at the corners of his mouth. "And I'm afraid the librarians are... well, they are academic to the highest order, of course, and they do not believe that any research should be published until it is entirely complete. You would have an advisor of sorts, but I believe that is more to get you acquainted with the Library, as it is quite large, and to be certain you are not stealing any of the books. They have had trouble with that in the past."

Harry looked down at the folder, letting Dumbledore's words wash over him. The Oxford Magical Research Library! He could imagine Hermione applying to something like this, but... him? Harry?
Half a year ago, he would have thought Dumbledore insane if he had suggested it. Now, though, he could only just stop his mind from racing through the lists of books he hadn't found in Hogwarts' collection, and the opportunity to finally consult them...

"I don't know what to say, sir," he managed to get out. "Do you really think they will accept me?"

"I am all but certain of it," Dumbledore assured him. "You will need letters of recommendation, but I will be happy to write you one myself, and I am positive both Clarke and Filius would as well. Unless, of course, you would prefer to ask someone else."

Harry shook his head, warding off something like dizziness.

Dumbledore sighed. "To be absolutely honest, Harry, I'm afraid that this summer is going to be an exceptionally busy one for myself. I don't think it will be possible for you to remain in the castle, even on the off chance that you are not accepted by the OMRL."

*That* effectively cut short the elation Harry had been feeling. Dumbledore spun his chair slowly to look out one of the windows on the side of the room, beyond which snow was beginning to fall on the Forbidden Forest. The headmaster looked not just pensive, but world-weary in a way Harry had almost forgotten he could, with how he always seemed when Harry saw him in the halls or at meals.

"I've heard that things have gotten... violent," Harry offered cautiously, thinking of Pandora's cousin.

Dumbledore shot him a sidelong glance, and dipped his chin in agreement. "There are long days ahead of us," he said. He sighed, standing, and wandered up the steps behind him, turning his back on Harry. "I'm afraid, my boy, that you have returned to a time where the future is uncertain. Even if your findings are correct and the world is fated to turn out a certain way, most of us have no way of knowing what the days ahead hold."

Guilt flooded through Harry, the same guilt he felt when he saw his parents in the halls and couldn't warn them about Pettigrew, the same guilt he felt when he realized that Frank Longbottom and Alice Gilbert, two seventh years, were undoubtedly Neville's parents, and he couldn't warn them about Bellatrix Lestrange.

"I wish I could get involved," he admitted. "That I didn't have to stay out of things like this. That I could give you what I know about what's going on, as little of it as there is. But..."

"We shan't risk that," Dumbledore said. He turned back to Harry, a smile creasing his papery face. "No, the fact that you exist at all is hope enough for me, my boy. The end is not upon us, apparently not even my end, from what you have said. I will take comfort in that."

Harry started to not, but he didn't like the feeling that even so small a motion came with so much risk. It would only take one change to prove his tentative findings wrong, after all, and ruin his chance of ever getting home. He finished his tea instead, and stood. "When do I need to complete this by?" he asked, holding up the folder with the application.

"If you give it to a house elf to bring to me before the new term begins, I will forward it to my contacts at the library." Dumbledore came down the steps with Harry to open the door for him. "I will see you at dinner, in a few hours, perhaps?"

"Hani has been insisting I eat in the hall, and... I should ask Professor Notaro and Professor Flitwick if they will write recommendations... so yes, I guess. Thank you, sir."

Dumbledore just smiled and waved Harry off, shutting the door softly behind him.
By the time the bells marked six o'clock, when they'd been told dinner would be available, Harry had filled out the basic application and found that otherwise he need only to complete a series of short essays on his end. He brought the folder with him to the Great Hall, where he excitedly explained the opportunity to Professor Notaro. As Dumbledore had suggested, the Runes Mistress had been equally enthusiastic and amenable to writing a letter of recommendation, and on her other side, Professor Flitwick offered before Harry even got around to asking.

Madam Pince listened on, studying Harry scrupulously, but only Professor Slughorn added any additional comments, and that was to explain how he knew several students who had gone into research at the Library. From there, he had quickly become sidetracked into his usual chatter.

Though Harry's mind was on the application—he realized he had not yet told Hani, and she would be as excited as he was to hear about it, he just knew it—he managed to follow the dinner conversation well enough to know when it was polite to leave the table. He was the first one up, this time, but he didn't make it more than a few steps before he was called back. This time it was Slughorn, not Dumbledore.

The Potions Master waved him over, as he was seated opposite to where Harry had been. "Mr. Harrigan," he began, wide-eyed and serious. His cheeks were flushed from what looked like sherry in his goblet. "Now, of course you have been doing remarkably well this whole quarter, and this offer for a scholarship only proves that. However, I seem to remember at the beginning of the year you expressed some concern over your potions OWL...?"

It took Harry a few moments to remember what the man was talking about. "Oh, yes. That, sir," he managed to stammer out. "I think your, um, mentorship has helped tremendously. My former teacher was simply horrid."

Somehow Harry found the strength not to turn his gaze to Snape, who was picking at a ravaged bone of turkey a few seats away.

Slughorn beamed. "Well, your hard work has certainly paid off, my boy! But to, shall we say, more firmly put your fears aside, I have a teensy little proposition for you. To get in some extra practical experience, before OWLs are upon you."

Harry wasn't sure how to respond that. To tell the truth, between the remainder of the research he could do here and the chance at the OMRL, his potions OWL seemed like a distraction. Still, he had no polite way to voice that, so he simply prompted, "Sir?"

"Young Severus—you do know Severus here, don't you? Yes, you are the same year, even if he is in my own House... well, I have already asked him to take on some extra work for me, brewing to restore the infirmary's stocks, and two sets of hands are always better than one, hm? If you were to join in... I can't say for certain, but I don't think it is unlikely the potions you would be brewing turn up in the practical! And, of course, you would be earning a bit of spare cash. Of course! We wouldn't leave you uncompensated."

Harry shifted from foot to foot. He really did not have a good reason or way to reject the Professor without seeming wholly ungrateful. But Snape? Snape was one of the people he had been most intently avoiding all year long. The circumstances surrounding his time travel, how the days prior he
had been wrapped up in the memory he'd seen... all that aside, Snape as Harry knew him was quite simply a horribly unpleasant person to be around. Outside of answering questions in class (which he rarely volunteered for) Harry had never even heard the teenaged version of Snape speak. Now, though, he could see Snape was just as miffed as Harry was by Slughorn's proposal, glancing up at Harry through his curtain of oily black hair with obvious unease.

"I think this is an excellent arrangement, Mr. Harrigan," Dumbledore advised, bringing Harry out of his momentary loss of words. "After all, it would be good to earn some pocket money for this summer, don't you think? So you don't have to spend so much time working when you could be taking full advantage of your other opportunities."

Harry, thinking of the sad collection of coins he had scrounged from his trunk, swallowed his misgivings. Snape might not like it, but Harry wasn't going to be intimidated by him, not when they were both fifteen and apparently both in need of money. Besides, he had been practicing careful non-involvement all year long. If he was ever going to be able to work with Snape in a somewhat civil manner, now would be the time.

"Yes. Of course, um... thanks, Professor. When should I...?"

"I've asked young Severus to come along tomorrow morning, say, around ten? You won't need to bring anything with you; we have all the materials and appropriate books available in the laboratory."

Harry nodded, mentally organizing his lists of tasks. If he went up and started on the essays right away, he should be able to get done in time to get some sleep, and then visit Hani for breakfast in the morning. "Alright," he said. "Thank you, sir. Happy Christmas."

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Hani was just as excited to hear about Oxford as he had expected her to be, though it was more that she was excited he would be meeting new people and not be stuck in the castle with just her for company all summer long. When he told her he was going to meet Snape to work on potions together, she'd even fixed him up a plate of breakfast to eat in the kitchens, dishing up heaps of eggs and roasted potatoes even as she lectured him for staying up so late that he'd missed the meal served in the Great Hall. Harry just smiled and gently redirected the conversation, asking instead about how the Christmas poker game had turned out. That led to conspiratorial gossip about some of the other elves drinking far more butterbeer than they ought to have, which Harry listened to with amusement as he ate.

After, he made his way down to the dungeons with a spring in his step and oranges in his pockets, almost able to forget that he was to be spending time with Snape, brewing potions, in the dungeons, on purpose, until they found each other in front of the door to the fifth year potions lab. They halted with several steps left between them, looking each other up and down. Harry knew he was being judged for his work jeans and sweater. He hadn't wanted to bother with robes that morning, and it wasn't like Snape's shabby uniform would be any better for brewing in. Before either boy could make a comment, however, Slughorn came bustling down the hall, letting them into the lab with a tired swish of his wand.

"Well, let's see here," Slughorn said when the lamps had flickered on and the three of them were gathered around his desk. He was looking rather like he'd just gotten up himself, dark circles under his eyes, none of the cheer he'd exhibited under the influence of the sherry the previous evening.
When he picked up the sheet at the top of a tall stack of parchment inked with a rather long list, he squinted, wrinkling up his nose.

Harry, reading upside-down, was relieved to find the list was made of mostly familiar potions. There was even a request for a batch of boils cure listed. Harry would always remember that—it was the first potion he'd ever tried, and Snape had failed him on it. Even though he'd studied the instructions furiously after the class, they'd never tried that particular potion again.

"Well, we're short of asphodel powder—you do know the proper method to reduce the petals, Severus? Yes, yes, good... Everything seems to be in order, then." Slughorn straightened up, and looked down at the pair of them. "I trust that the pair of you know how to behave yourselves and act responsibly in the lab, and that if I leave the stores open for you, you will make proper use of the ingredients. And you, Mr. Snape, I know how you enjoy your experiments, but these potions are going to your fellow students. You will remember that?"

Snape nodded, but there was glimmer in his black eyes that Harry did not want to identify. He wondered if Slughorn hadn't invited him along only to try to keep Snape in check.... though how he thought Harry might help with that, he hadn't the slightest. Maybe he just thought having someone else present would deter Snape from doing anything too drastic...

"Right, then," Slughorn said. He drew his wand from his cloak and languidly waved it towards the storeroom, sending a burst of magic that settled into the lock of the door and forced it open. "I'll leave the pair of you to it! If anything should go wrong, you know where to find me—although I am entertaining Jasmine Bundimun this afternoon, chaser for the Harpies, you know, and would rather not have to come running out of that..."

Snape didn't reply, so Harry nodded again, and Slughorn hurried out of the classroom, almost like he was making an escape. The closing door echoed loudly behind him.

Harry turned slowly to face Snape, but before he could say anything, Snape beat him to it: "I don't know who you are, but I am not wasting any more time on these potions than necessary. If you're just trying to cure Slughorn's favor, you can leave right now. I don't need some novice idiot blowing anything up."

Harry blinked, but he slowly raised his hands in a gesture of peace. Snape's eyes darted towards them. "Look, I really don't mean anything by this. You're probably ten times the brewer I'll ever be, but I can chop things as well as the next bloke..."

Snape's lip curled up. It was strange... this was obviously Snape; he had the same mannerisms, same biting tone and prickly exterior—but even as he challenged Harry, instead of cruel he just looked nervous and awkward. He hadn't quite grown into his face yet—not that he'd ever grow into that beakish nose—and his skin was sallow, with dark circles under his eyes like he hadn't slept in days. And this was during the holidays.

"If you just want me fetching ingredients, that's fine too," Harry said. "I mean, Slughorn was right when he said I need practice, at least if I want an 'outstanding' on my OWL. But honestly, I'd be happy with an 'acceptable'."

Snape sniffed, but looked back down at the list. Apparently he could not think of a way to get rid of Harry, or Harry had passed some sort of test, because after a few minutes he picked it up, holding it too close to his face as he scanned it. Harry wondered if the other boy needed glasses. He'd never seen Snape wearing them as an adult, so maybe it was just a strange habit he had.

"Set up three pewter cauldrons, boiling a liter of water each," he ordered at last, setting the list down
again. "We will start with the boil cure, and get those out of the way. You can manage that much, I hope."

Harry just nodded and set to work.

It wasn’t fun, or even pleasant, but once Snape had seen that Harry could brew a simple potion without blowing up the lab he seemed at least somewhat able to relax. He left Harry in charge of the simple potions, the burn salves and the cough drought, and when those were done charged Harry with preparing ingredients while he brewed.

Of course, even there Snape was watching him closely, highly critical of his every move. “Are you chopping that, or are you trying to express your childhood trauma?” he demanded when Harry was set to chopping shrivelfig roots. It struck Harry as a ridiculous thing to say, and his eyes watered trying to keep a straight face. Something told him Snape wouldn’t take kindly to being laughed at.

“What?”

“Merlin’s saggy arse, you’re thick. How, exactly, are you expecting to get worthwhile results with that pile of shit? You might as well chuck the root in whole, and replace it all with crup piss while you’re at it.”

While he couldn’t quite manage the eloquence of the insults he would make as an adult, he certainly made up for it in crassness.

Harry looked down at his cutting board. So his cuts weren’t exactly producing a standard shape. They were the same size… roughly… and that was what really mattered, right? “It’s a root,” he pointed out. “It’s going to be uneven whatever I do. Rolls around too much.”

Snape’s face twisted, and he gave a long sigh and cast some sort of spell over the potions he was working on before stalking over. Shoving Harry aside, he snatched the knife and and one of the roots from the stack, pushing Harry’s work off his board and onto the floor and, with an almost alarming deftness, cut off the narrow tips of the root, bisected the remaining portion down the length, put each half flat-side down on the board, and shoved the knife back into Harry’s hand.

“How the hell did you end up in Ravenclaw, if you haven’t a single bit of brain that hasn’t been replaced with flobberworm bile?” he snapped, storming away. “‘Rolls around too much.’ What an idiot.”

Harry considered the cutting board for a minute, and eventually shrugged. No one had ever told him he could cut a root in half without somehow ruining its magical properties, and apparently even by the nineties Snape didn’t think it was a lesson that anyone should need to be taught. Beyond the lab safety rules, which had been drilled into their heads until they could recite them in their sleep (Number Twelve: If you should add ingredients without knowing exactly what they will accomplish, then the cauldron explosion that lands you permanently in St. Mungo’s will have been your own fault) Snape had never given his students much instructions on technique, but simply expected them to know what they were doing. Most of what Harry knew had come from his somewhat limited cooking sensibilities (the Dursleys did not believe in vegetables), and he didn’t remember ever reading about it in the textbook… then again, he’d rarely put the effort into following his Potions lectures when Snape had been the one giving them.

In perfect irony of his future ironclad safety rulings, as Slughorn had warned it seemed Snape hardly ever followed the directions as they were given to him. The stack of parchment Slughorn had left included the official instructions for each potion they were to brew, but Snape had modified those before he had given any of them to Harry. For one of the potions he’d taken on himself, he’d taken
one look at the sheet, curled his lip in disgust, and burned it to a crisp with a nasty demonstration of incendio. Then he'd proceeded to set up four separate cauldrons and brew the potion from memory—or from improvisation, perhaps; it was impossible to tell. Despite himself, Harry found it fascinating to watch Snape at work. He seemed able to manage multiple potions at once without losing track of where he was in each, and despite being as young as Harry was, he brewed with the same fluid intent behind each motion that he did in the future.

As competent as Snape was, they might have benefitted from harsher rules to keep him safe. One time in particular Snape had added something to a potion which had promptly blown up not only the cauldron he'd been working at but the other four he had going as well. Harry had barely had time to duck. He still wasn't sure how Snape had gotten a shield charm up fast enough.

Even though Harry was just preparing ingredients and taking over stirring while Snape handled the more complex motions, even so in some ways he was learning a great deal about potions. He could almost understand why the Professor Snape of the future spoke about them so lovingly, even as he disparaged his students' attempts. It was painfully apparent that Snape was some sort of genius. Unfortunately, it was the same sort of genius that Hermione sometimes displayed—the type that simply did not understand why everyone else could not keep up. And even as a teenager, Snape snarled at the slightest error. It was only from years of experience that Harry was able to keep a cool head and not mangle his efforts further when the other boy lost his temper.

But beyond that, the pair got along reasonably well. Snape's insults weren't really personal, not the way they would have been if he'd known Harry was a Potter. They worked with equal eagerness to see their task done, and finished before the month was out, after five days of breakfast to dinner brewing. Slughorn sent them off with his compliments and a little purse full of coins each. Harry quickly tucked that away, but Snape peered into his, as though he did not trust it actually contain the promised amount. When Slughorn clapped them on the shoulders, both flinched, but the man did not seem to notice.

"Perhaps next year Miss Evans will need to find a new potions partner!" he suggested as he pulled them out of the lab.

It took Harry a minute to understand what Slughorn was saying, but by then Snape had fixed him with one last unreadable look and pulled out from under Slughorn's meaty hand, hurrying off in the direction of the Slytherin common room.

Slughorn sighed. "Yes, well," he said, as though it warranted some explanation. "Young Severus has the makings of a brilliant potioneer, of course, if he would only just stick to what we were supposed to be covering in class. But he hasn't much in the way of conversational skills, I'm afraid."

Harry just managed a strained smile, thanking the professor on last time, and made his own way out of the dungeons.

His mind was racing. Snape and Lily studying in the library together had been a strange enough sight—but potions partners? And the memory... Harry had tried to forget what would be happening before the end of the year, but it had shown up time and time again in his dreams, just as clear as it had been in the pensieve... the way Lily had stuck her neck out for Snape, even when he then went and called her a 'mudblood'...

What was going on between the two of them? Were they—'friends' seemed like far too dramatic a word, and Harry couldn't imagine Snape being called 'friends' with anyone, let alone his mother. But there was definitely something between Snape and Lily. And while Professor Snape had never been hesitant to insult James to scorn Harry, she had never been worth his mention...
Harry thought it best to put his newfound confusion out of his mind for the rest of the holiday and focus on more important things, like translating more of the rune-coded journals and making plans for his potential research at Oxford.

He ran into Professor Notaro again at lunch on New Year's Eve, who told him she had sent on her letter of recommendation to Oxford and officially gotten his schedule changed to move Harry into her fourth-year class for the upcoming term, but that he had to see Flitwick to confirm the changes. When he went up to the tower, the Professor explained that fourth-year runes overlapped with fifth-year History of Magic, and if Harry really wanted to take it, he would have to study for his History OWL without Professor Binns' lectures.

Harry had enthusiastically accepted the change.

He spent New Year's Eve in the kitchens, watching in amusement as the House Elves, drunk on Butterbeer and even (for the more daring ones among them) cider, introduced him to elvish dances and songs before they forgot he was there at all. After the previous year, when the holidays at Grimmauld Place had been a rather solemn affair, and the year before that, with all the drama of the Yule Ball and the Triwizard Tournament hanging over his head, Harry was pleased to have had a rather relaxing holiday.

"You know what, Hani?" he told the elf as they watched the rest of the crowd from across the kitchens, butterbeer warming his chest. "This time travel thing—it's not all bad."

Hani smiled back at him.

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Chapter End Notes

Happy reading, everyone! Just so y'all know, over on my end the working draft of this fic has passed 300k. I'm a one-human show over here, and all my efforts to go through and edit this one down a bit kept expanding the chapter out instead, so I apologize for any rough bits that might have slipped through—I'd rather post sooner than accidentally let this fic dawdle on any more than it already has.

Thank you for the comments! Please don't hesitate to let me know what you think, good things, places to improve, or whatever strikes your fancy. I'm just a poor author slogging along, so any feedback I can get helps keep me at it.
As the new term began, Harry's workload quadrupled. The professors seemed to think they had been going lightly on the fifth years in the autumn, as now on top of regular assignments there were review essays and mock exams to worry about. Harry's adjusted schedule did not help. He may not have to attend History classes anymore, but he still had to do the same revision work to be certain he passed the OWL. Besides, the second-level runes class was much more time-consuming than the basic first-level work had been.

Then there was the matter of Hector and Pandora. No matter how bland Harry made himself out to be, how many times he held back his opinions or offered insipid excuses not to engage in their discussions, Hector seemed to have made it his mission to get Harry to eat breakfast with them every day. Harry didn't understand it. He had done absolutely nothing to warrant the pair's friendly behavior, but they seemed to have laid claim to him, and Harry wasn't sure how to shake them off without being insulting or outright cruel.

Of course, it was possible that he was encouraging them. He knew the risk, but still, he just couldn't say 'no' to the relief that the easy social interaction brought after his lonely first term. By the end of the first week of term, Hector had even managed to talk Harry into sitting in with an OWL study group that met in the small room near Ravenclaw tower. Well, 'Talked into' was putting it mildly—like that first breakfast in the Great Hall, Hector had simply grabbed Harry and dragged him along.

"I thought last semester you were worried that I was working too much?" Harry had laughed when Hector had pulled him into a room already too full of people and only then explained his intentions.

"That was before I knew you weren't taking your studies seriously," Hector replied. "Whether or not you care at all, we're all fifth years, and you are going to suffer along with the rest of us."

The group consisted of all the fifth year Ravenclaws, the two Hufflepuff boys who remained over break (and who turned out to be dating, which some of the girls found disturbingly romantic), Lily and her fellow Gryffindors Mary MacDonald and Miriam Alexi, and two Slytherins Harry had never spoken to before, Lucinda Talkalot and Gwendolyn Noble. The room was rather cramped, and as there was no furniture they were squeezed together sitting on the floor with their backs to the walls,
but somehow it reminded Harry of the DA. Hector and Cat Sanchez ran the meetings. Harry mostly managed to stay silent, only contributing when no one else had an answer or someone asked him directly, but it was... nice, to say the least, to have a group he somewhat belonged to.

No one else knew why platters of pastries began showing up, but none of them were complaining. Harry was sure to pass on their thanks to Hani and the kitchen elves.

To round out was Harry’s research into time travel, but by February Harry had finally reached the point where he could not find any books to read in Hogwarts' library that had to do with time travel that weren't printed in German or another language Harry did not have time to learn. Not wanting to waste what little time he had, he dug the notes he had written about Hermione's time turner that summer and reviewed them, adding anything else he could think of about the experience, and then started a new stack of documents summarizing everything he had heard about time travel before it had happened to him.

It quickly became apparent that much of what he could think of came from muggle stories. When they were turning ten, Uncle Vernon had taken Dudley and his friend Piers to see ‘Back to the Future III’ in theatres for his birthday. Harry, of course, hadn't been invited, but leading up to the day Dudley had watched the other two films, and Harry had seen or at least heard the majority of those by lingering in the kitchen cleaning, or weeding just outside the open window, the same way he had 'seen' most of the movies and shows he had. There was also ‘Doctor Who’, of course, which was a television show all about an alien travel through time and space. Even Harry knew about that, though Dudley had never watched it. And he was certain that when he had been in primary school they had even read a story about children time travelling, though he couldn't remember much more than something about a butterfly from that.

The more he thought about it, the stronger his resolve to send a note to Dumbledore, asking if he knew of any good sources of information about muggle ideas on the matter. He'd passed it through Hani, since it felt rather strange to borrow a school owl to send to the headmaster—not to mention, whenever he appeased Hector by having breakfast in the Great Hall the headmaster seemed to be absent.

Harry wondered if his absences had something to do with Voldemort… no one talked about the Death Eaters directly, but Dumbledore had been certain that there was war coming. He tried not to think too much about Voldemort, though, because inevitably it lead to him sitting in the Great Hall watching James and Lily and the head boy, Frank Longbottom, and all the other students safe in Hogwarts’ halls, and wondering how he could be so selfish as not to even try to stop the war before it hurt them.

Hani didn't pass him back a reply until the end of March. Apparently Dumbledore had thought to ask the Muggle Studies professor, who had suggested that muggle physicists attempted to explain time to some extent, but that was all he could contribute. Dumbledore recommended writing Flourish & Blotts in Diagon Alley for recommendations on a basic text, as they were known to import muggle works, but that was as much as much advice as he could contribute.

Harry sat on that idea for a few days, scouring the library in hopes of finding anything on muggle sciences, but the closest he could find was a dossier on the connections between muggle chemistry and potions. While fascinating—Harry had never gotten far enough along into muggle sciences to know that they also had to memorize the periodic table, if in a strangely organized format and with information wizards did not really care about—it did not really touch on physics, as far as Harry could tell. He wasn't really certain he even knew what 'physics' encompassed. Chemistry was molecules and atoms and chemicals and that sort of thing, and biology was plants and animals, he thought, but physics? Gravity and light and apparently time—they didn’t seem like things that would
fit nicely together.

Harry had nothing against Flourish & Blotts, and he was sure that if Dumbledore had recommended it than if he’d known what to ask for they would have found a way to get it for him. But Harry did not, and did not even know where to look to figure that out. No, what he really needed was... a muggle. An honest-to-goodness muggle with the practical knowledge of science and the sort of things he might need to begin to understand it.

Unfortunately, Hogwarts didn't have any of those, so his next closest bet was a muggleborn.

He considered asking Hector, remembering the other boy had said his mother was a doctor. Harry wasn't entirely sure what sort of sciences a doctor would have to study, but he knew it was a lot, so there was a good chance that if Hector didn't have the answers Harry needed, she would. The trouble was—Hector was getting too close. Every time Hector pulled Harry down to the Great Hall to eat, or dragged him into a conversation of wild tangents with Pandora, or urged him to speak up in the study group, Harry was both grateful and troubled. Even if there was a chance what he'd told Dumbledore was right, (and most everything he'd read about time travel seemed to suggest that the past was certain) to Harry, the chance that he was wrong and the future could be changed was still enough to not risk it. It only took once, after all.

So he didn't want Hector to have anything else to bond with him over, or, for that matter, to become curious enough about to go digging for answers. The problem was, his self-isolation meant Hector was the only muggleborn he knew well enough to ask.

The solution came to Harry when he arrived early to the study group the Thursday before the Easter holiday. He'd been having trouble getting anything done all day, once he'd realized it was on the same day twenty years later that this whole misadventure had started. He had hurried to the small room, hoping to avoid running into Hector in the dormitory before hand, and had found Lily and Mary already waiting inside. It took half a minute of gaping for his scattered thoughts to settle—it should have been obvious. Lily was as much a muggleborn option as anyone.

“Hi,” he said awkwardly. “Mind if I sit with you?”

“Go right ahead,” said Mary. The two Gryffindors budged up, though at this point there was plenty of space and they really hadn't needed to.

“I had a question, actually,” he said as he settled down next to them, ending up in a corner. “You're Lily Evans, right? And Mary Macdonald?”

“That's right. And your name was... Dudley Harrigan?” Lily asked.

“Yes, but call me Harry.”

“Not fond of 'Dudley’?”

“Not particularly.”


“Really?” Harry was surprised to hear it, but he supposed the name 'Dudley' had to come from somewhere. He couldn't imagine Dudley Dursley playing cricket, though.

“Sure. Met him a couple times, but, you know, distant family…”
“Right.”

“And I had a cousin named Harry, too, who I suspect might have been a wizard.”

“You suspect?”

She shook her head, some of her hair falling loose from the messy braid on her shoulder and into her face, where she blew at them unsuccessfully. “He died young. I don't think he would have known. Muggle family through and through, mine…” She blinked and looked over at Harry, tucking the stray hairs back behind her ear with an easy grin. “Don't mind me prattling on. You needed something?”

Harry pushed past the rather depressing thought that he might have been named after a cousin who died young and cleared his throat. “I was actually wondering—actually… it's a muggle question, really. You don't mind?”

She tilted her head, glancing over to Marry, who shrugged. Harry finally understood what people meant when they said he had her eyes, seeing her so close. It was uncanny, really, seeing them on someone else's face. If Dumbledore hadn't given him the potion to turn his a dull hazel, they would have looked like siblings, what with his hair stuck Weasley-red.

“Muggle question? I mean, I'll answer if I can, but…”

Harry nodded. “I’ve been doing some research recently, and I came across a reference to science that took me a while to understand, and thought it might be interesting to learn more, only there isn't really a good stock of muggle books here, you see? And I don't have anyone left to ask in the muggle world. So I was wondering if you happened to know of any—what I need is a good introduction to physics. An overview, recently, just to sate my curiosity.”

“Physics?” Lily echoed. “Well… I think my sister might have had it in school, but she thought sciences were for the boys. I could ask my da', though, if you don't mind waiting a bit to hear back. He's got a bit of a hobbyist's knack for the sciences.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “I would put in an order through Flourish & Blotts, but I wouldn't know what to ask for.”

“He should be able to give you something.” Lily tilted her head again. “But where did you come across a reference to science here? Most people seem think it's pointless to understand the world the way muggles do.”

“I found a book on chemistry and potions and how they relate. I was wondering if other branches of science might be relevant, too.”

“Watch out,” Mary warned, cutting in and knocking into her friend with her shoulder. “Don't get Lily started on biology and transfiguration. You'll never escape.”

“Mary!” Lily said. She didn't really seem to mind, though she shoved her friend's arm in retaliation. “Even you have to admit—it is absolutely infuriating to try and make sense of how magic could turn a living thing into an inanimate object and back again. Every time we change, oh, a bird into a feather duster, we are not just rewriting DNA, the way animagus transfigurations must work, but completely abolishing basic life functions, and suspending the action of cells, and then somehow reversing that. We're essentially killing things and bringing things back to life when we do that sort of transfiguration, have you ever thought about that? It's basically necromancy. And then there are partial transfigurations where it is obvious the animals are still alive and conscious of their situation,
Harry laughed, amazed. That, he thought, that moment was going to be what he thought of when he thought about his mother, for years to come. He tried to pull the reins in on his grin, but he was probably still smiling like an idiot. “I mean, it sounds fascinating, and, yeah, frustrating, but… this is magic we are talking about. If it were completely explainable by muggle means it would just be, well, science.”

She squinted at him, like she could understand his reasoning but found it terribly boring, and finally let it go with a shrug. “Well, I'll write da' and see what he says. Probably won't get back to me until after the holiday, if you don't mind.”

“Thanks,” said Harry earnestly, and then he sat and listened as the two witches fell back into their discussion of the alchemical properties of zinc.

Over the Easter holiday, Slughorn managed to snag Harry to help with extra brewing, again, though this time the professor stuck around for almost an hour to excitedly gossip about recent news from several of his former students. Harry managed to keep up with polite interjections, while Snape said nothing, shooting Slughorn irritated glances whenever he wasn't looking. When Slughorn finally left, they brewed in comfortable silence, Harry fetching what he was told to, crushing this ingredient and chopping that. It was mostly the same potions they had brewed over the winter holiday, and none of it terribly interesting, but it wasn't as though he had anything else to do except revise.

And there was revising—plenty of it. About half the group Hector had pulled him into stayed in the castle for the break, and Cat Sanchez had gotten it into her head that even Harry and Mandy Martins were going to earn 'O's on their Herbology OWLs if it was the last thing they did. Snape gave him weird looks when Harry took out his revisions in the frequent breaks the longer brewing processes allowed, but the Slytherin also took it upon himself to correct several mistakes on Harry’s poisonous ingredients chart.

The Tuesday following break, Harry was working on his Transfiguration in the library when Lily came to find him. She bore not only a response to his inquiry but something far better—a book.

“Da’ was right chuffed,” she said with a grin. “He's got it in his head that science is the superpower muggles have instead of magic, which is probably right, because mostly wizards haven't a clue how science works, or a hair of interest, really.” But her smile faltered somewhat as she looked down at his transfiguration notes. “I'm not really sure how much this will help you, to be honest? He said it was a High School introductory text, but... you're not exactly a muggle student, are you?”

Harry shrugged, already flipping through the pages. “I had some muggle schooling before I turned eleven,” he said. “So hopefully I can at least make some sense of it.” Still, he wrinkled up his nose. “Looks like a lot of maths.”

She glanced down to where he was pointing. “Oh, there's some arithmancy books that will get you up to that,” she said. “I mean, they'll get you royally sidetracked from physics, but arithmancy can do algebra, mostly, and even some calculus. And a lot of arithmetic that'd make muggles scream.”
Harry found himself glancing towards where he knew the arithmancy books were shelved. He'd avoided them previously, since he already had to deal with learning runes, but... “Right. Brilliant—really. Thanks, um, Evans.”

“Lily,” she corrected, and she stood there for a moment longer shifting from foot to foot. “You’re a muggleborn, then?”

“What?” Harry glanced up from the book, finding her bright green eyes studying him again. “Oh, um... no. Half-blood. Muggle-raised, though. Didn't even know about magic until I started getting lessons.”

“Funny, I’d thought you were a pureblood,” she confessed. “I mean, being a transfer student and all. The majority of the holdouts to the Ministry’s education standardization efforts—”

“Are pureblood families, yeah. I’ve heard. No, my, um, my family just didn’t want to send me off to some boarding school, and asked for other options. They would have kept me in muggle school, too, if they had their way.”

“Huh,” Lily said. “Awfully strange thought, that. I wonder if there are some who do—who stay in muggle school, I mean. I would think it would spell danger for the Statute of Secrecy, but surely not every muggleborn is allowed a fully magical education… Can’t imagine if my parents ‘d said no.”

Harry couldn’t, either, but outward, he just shrugged. “Never really thought about it. I just wanted to learn everything I could about magic.”

That was true—but what if he hadn't been allowed to attend? Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon hadn't wanted to let him, after all, and Uncle Vernon practically went mental, taking them out to a house in the middle of the ocean to try and evade the letters, and it was only because Hagrid had been there to knock down the door and spirit him away that Harry had even known about Hogwarts at all. If it had been Dudley who had been magical—never mind the ridiculousness of that image—but if it had been Dudley, Dumbledore and the Ministry couldn't have forced the Dursleys to let him go, could they? What if they had still said no? What if Dudley hadn't wanted to go?

Instead of voicing these thoughts, he held up the book. "Do you mind if I borrow this? I'll probably need it until the end of the term, with OWLs and all..."

She shrugged. "Just let me know if you find anything worthwhile. Da' would love to hear about it.”

Harry nodded, smiling, feeling a bewildering pang of guilt at his first direct lie to his mother—though Lily wasn't his mother yet, really. Even if he did find anything, he wasn't going to risk affecting his grandfather and through him possibly his Aunt in that way. As tempting as it was to do everything possible to change what his childhood had been like, after all the reading he’d done about time travel Harry had to admit that without what he had gone through growing up with the Dursleys he would hardly be himself anymore.

When Lily moved away, heading off to rejoin the other Gryffindor girls, Harry was startled to see that her presence had hidden another. Half hidden in the shadows stood Snape, staring at Harry from over the top of a book he had pulled off the shelves. Harry raised his eyebrows, wondering what on earth he was doing, and Snape jumped, two bright patches of red appearing high on his cheeks. He seemed to have been startled into realized what he was doing, and scowled as he grabbed another book from the shelf, before turning and slipping away into the next aisle. Harry stared after him, but shook his head and reluctantly put the book aside, returning to his homework. He would never be able to figure out Snape, and it probably wasn't even worth it to try.
Harry hadn’t been wrong about how busy he was going to be. The last two weeks of April seemed to slip away in a flurry of practice exams, pop quizzes, cram revising, and increasingly regular in-class student breakdowns. And where he’d been reading wizarding books before, now he was taking every spare moment to try and make sense of the Physics book.

He had given up on the mathematics of it already, and was just trying to understand the concepts. From what he did understand in his piecewise scanning, what little of it he could relate to time told Harry that muggles considered time to be a., a relative constant, linear, measurable progression; b., intrinsically related to the speed of light and anything that might be faster than that; c., moving in one direction, which was to say onwards; d., much less constant and linear when the universe beyond Earth was concerned; and e., relative to things like distance and perspective. These were not exactly newfound revelations, but the muggle authors had a gift for phrasing things much more directly than the wizarding texts were.

Hector had come in late one evening, taken one look at the physics book propped open in Harry's lap, and deemed him mad for taking interest such a thing when OWLs were looming. Harry had stuck to reading it in the kitchens after that, where no one was likely to give him grief about it.

The worst thing about OWLs was the stress it was putting his classmates through. It was perfectly understandable. In other circumstances, Harry would probably have been more concerned about them, although in the nineties he probably wouldn't be pulled into the group revising sessions or get caught helping his roommate memorize long lists of ingredient classifications that were somehow also taking root in his mind into the early hours of the morning, either. In that sense, perhaps the sort of panicked preparations fever the Ravenclaws had caught was a good thing, as he was getting secondhand exposure. Hermione had always crammed on her own, as she raced so far ahead of Harry and Ron they were never on the same page. And Ron... well, Ron's response to academic stress was to ignore it and then lean on superstition to carry him to a passing grade, and come out the other end determined to forget about the whole ordeal. Harry wouldn't say the time travel was worth it, but with the Ravenclaws and the group revisions, he stood to get better marks on his OWLs than he ever would have in the nineties.

The real trouble with the generalized stress the fifth years were facing was that his classmates were losing control of their magic. In one lesson Cat Sanchez had transfigured not only her teacup but everyone else's as well, and the strength of her magic had toppled Harry to the ground in surprise. And in Charms, where the class was often partnered up and trying spells on each other, poor aim and erratic results had Harry’s head buzzing in a way he doubted anyone else's was. At least he could blame the effects on a spell miscast, when he found himself ignoring every sense but the magic and had to reel himself back in under Hector's worried looks. And if he claimed headaches to escape to the infirmary more than he had since the first few weeks of the school year, it wasn't too far-fetched to blame it on his own stress, really. Flitwick was pitying; McGonagall unimpressed but not about to hold back an obviously unwell student from care. At least in Runes they were working on entirely mundane transliteration—Harry’d already gotten enough practice with that to find it easy, and the headaches were only from getting a code a letter off.

By the time the OWLs finally arrived, Harry was ready for them to be over. Hector, despite Pandora’s serene attempts to ease his nerves, spent the whole morning of the first day panicking, and most everyone else was at least looking somewhat nervous. Except James and Sirius. Those two were gabbing loudly about how all the fuss was such a joke, that everyone was playing into the system when it wasn’t worth the emotions they put into it, but hardly anyone was listening. Lily, of course, was absolutely fine with telling James to put a sock in it, but she probably only bothered because like Pandora she was stuck trying to make sure Mary did not panic so badly she could not sit her exams.
Shortly after the nine o’clock bell rang, they were ushered into the Great Hall, where the four house tables had been pushed aside to make way for four neat rows of desks. They each were directed to an assigned seat, Harry taking his place in the front right corner of the room, and were set to begin in short order. Harry heard the rush of papers flipping over behind them, and felt the wave of magic peaking with anxiousness pass through the room. With a deep breath, he turned over his own paper, and did as best he could to push the others out of his mind. His forays into Hermione’s occlumency book were useful for some things, after all.

So they passed, one by one; theory in the morning and practicals in the afternoon. Harry was surprised to feel that he was doing rather well. Though he had barely in the review sessions, between those and the intense revising the Professors had been putting them through, he was able to answer most every question reasonably well. And he had always been a competent enough caster, so the practicals weren’t particularly tiring either—even if he did mix up his switching and banishing spells.

The most difficult part was keeping his focus with all the nervous students and their magic, but after so many months of studying his classmates and being kept to the relative isolation of the Great Hall, even that was relatively straightforward. And he had managed to impress his examiner, Professor Marchbanks, when Thomas Kirke’s nerves had his hands shaking so bad his aim went south and Harry had spun around to put up a shield charm before the tickling charm could hit either of them.

After Charms, Transfiguration, and Herbology took up the first three days of the week, the fifth years were moving through the castle like zombies. Perhaps it was the stress, or maybe the desks in the Great Hall were charmed to sap energy, but it was bad enough that Hani actually brought Harry coffee on Thursday morning. She had always been outspoken against giving children coffee, and had told Harry conspiratorially of her past Mistress’s bad habit of drinking twelve cups to stay up all night in whirlwinds of fierce research, but apparently she took pity on Harry that morning.

Still, it was their Defense Against the Dark Arts exam that morning, and Harry had always felt DADA was his best subject. Even after the disjointed education he had received, what with Quirrel’s stammering and droning lectures— and the spirit of Lord Voldemort attached to his head— Lockhart’s self-absorption, and Umbridge’s ridiculous insistence on teaching absolute rubbish, Harry hadn’t been the one in charge of Dumbledore’s Army for nothing.

In fact, he was so well certain that he’d scored at least an ‘Exceeds Expectations’ from the written exam alone, it wasn’t until Flitwick announced the test was over that he realized what day it was.

Harry stood stock still at the front of the Great Hall, staring as Snape, nose pressed into the question sheet as he hurried towards the door, paid no attention to the Marauders moving in their customary mass down the aisle. He was so absolutely frozen that Flitwick came over to ask if he’d been hit with petrificus.

“No, um, I think I messed up my Latin in one of the essays,” he blundered. “I guess it’s too late to worry about that now.”

“Quite,” said Flitwick, though his face seemed to soften. “Do run along, Mr. Harrigan. ‘You could do with some fresh air before the practical, I should think?’

The practical? Harry hadn’t even thought about that. He fled the Great Hall, trying to keep his distance from James’ and Sirius’s bravado.

Snape was going to face… that. His worst memory. And Harry couldn’t get involved. Even if what was surely coming meant James was sabotaging Snape’s chances at the practical for no good reason, he could not get involved. There was no red-headed boy interfering in Snape’s memory, and that memory was a close to anything certain he had about the past. He could not get involved, not
without risking everything…

Still, he couldn’t help but linger near the edge of the crowd making its way down the slope in front of the castle. He felt a need, no, a duty to witness it, to know for certain that what he’d seen in the pensieve had been the truth… that it hadn’t been some cruel trick of Snape’s…

The four Gryffindor boys lounged beneath the large beech tree at the edge of the lake, Lupin pulling out a book from his bag and flicking through it, Sirius stretched out to watch the other students, James tossing and catching his stolen snitch—strange, Harry thought, since his Dad was a chaser, not a seeker—and Pettigrew, looking on with sycophantic glee. Lily was with the girls from the study group, their shoes shucked and robes hiked as they waded out from the shore. Even Pandora and Hector were there, a ways off; everyone in their year.

Harry chose his spot in the shade of the walkway carefully, leaning up against the wall beside a large bush, where he could look on without drawing anyone’s attention. He studied the students, trying to determine if they were where they had been. He wouldn’t have known Pandora and Hector’s faces when he first saw the memory, but the people he had cared about at the time—the Marauders, and Snape, and his mother—they were all where they had been… He tensed as he watched Sirius’s mouth move and James catch the snitch for the last time, knowing what was coming… He couldn’t interfere; it wasn’t worth the risk…

Still, when Snape emerged from his hidden spot, nose still buried in the question sheet, Harry’s hand flew to where his wand was tucked into his robes.

His wasn’t the only to do so. A moment later, James called out to Snape, and before Harry could process what was happening, the two-on-one, one-sided duel had started.

Harry missed most of it. He hadn’t been paying attention, and was too agitated to begin with, and so was unprepared to deal with the reality of the fight. Once spells started flying, a ringing he hadn’t noticed in his ears until now grew until he couldn’t hear the actual spells being shouted. He nearly pressed his hands over his ears, but stopped halfway—it wouldn’t help, and he wasn’t thinking about the ringing, he was keeping his eyes peeled and watching in horror. He knew what was being said. This part of the memory—this was still clear in his dreams long after he’d stuck his head in it. Was he watching or remembering the way James pointed his wand down at the boy sprawled on the lawn —?

“Leave him alone!”

Lily’s voice cut through the ringing, and the snap as James broke his spell seemed to bring Harry back to himself. He heard something—heavy breathing, nearly panting, and a drumming—and nearly looked around until he realized there was no one else near enough for it to be anyone but himself.

He shouldn’t be here. He shouldn’t have followed them.

“All right, Evans?” James said, turning to find Lily with her hands on her hips, barefoot in the grass. James’ hand ran through his hair, messing it up even worse, a habit Harry had seen a thousand times from across the classroom by now.

“Leave him alone. What’s he ever done to you?”

Harry grabbed for his bag, slowly pushing up off the wall to his feet. Every eye on the slope was turned to the arguing pair. He could leave, quietly, and no one would notice him…
“Well…” James’ voice hovered on the word, leaning into Sirius like there was something only the pair of them could understand. “It’s more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean…”

He should be leaving. Harry. He should have been sneaking away, letting history play out.

His hand was still on his wand.

“You think you’re funny,” Lily said, ignoring the tittering laughter around her. Harry’s eyes darted from face to face, making note of who thought this was funny, who thought scourgifying someone’s mouth was in any way amusing… “But you’re just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone.”

Harry had to agree with her… but he shouldn’t be around to hear this. Now that he’d gotten his confirmation, that was enough. He forced himself to shift into a slow step sideways along the wall, but his eyes were back on Snape, who was at the same time starting to inch towards his wand, never mind the soap still frothing his mouth…

James, apparently not getting the message, was unperturbed. “I will if you go out with me, Evans,” he coaxed. Harry watched as beside James Sirius rolled his eyes, but James was oblivious, singularly focused on this age-old goal. “Go on… Go out with me, and I’ll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again.”

Snape was within inches of reaching his wand now.

Harry took another step.

“I wouldn’t go out with you if it were a choice between you and—the giant squid!”

“Bad luck, Prongs… OY!”

Sirius had turned back and found Snape, still sprawled across the grass, but before Sirius could get his wand up Snape had slashed his up with a white light springing from its tip—

Harry staggered back, as though he had been the one struck. That spell, whatever it had been, felt like a clap of thunder bursting in his chest, and the air in his throat was suddenly pushing to get out—

James, his cheek and robes glistening with fresh blood, had Snape up in the air, robes falling over his face, grayed pants and spindly legs bare in the early summer air, magic curling around his ankle like cutting swine—

Oh. Harry wasn’t breathing. He was supposed to be breathing, wasn’t he? Deep breath in…

—the magic snapped. Snape fell to the ground, crashing head over heels—

…and deep breath out… Steady…

—but he was on his feet again in record time, wand in the air, reaching with magic crackling around him, slashing it forward with no clear spell on his tongue, only fear and anger curving his intent—

Sirius, this time, cast the hex to impede him. Snape, still as a Hermione petrified, as Neville Longbottom trying to stop them from leaving the tower, as Cedric on the ground in the graveyard, toppled forward to the ground.

And there was Lily’s voice, from a great distance, calling out over the fits of laughter echoing off the lake and hillside: “LEAVE HIM ALONE!”
Harry closed his eyes, grabbing at the wall for support, but not really feeling it as his fingers tingled with numbness. He could do this. He had lasted a whole year without letting the magic get the best of him in such a public space. Every trick of occlumency he could remember he tried to call on. He knew this magic; there was Hector, familiar Hector, across the lawn, Pandora beside him… He could breathe evenly, he remembered how, he could, he could. His heart knew it’s proper pace. His ears…

“—from some filthy little mudblood like her!”

Harry opened his eyes, looking around frantically—but yes, his ears could hear, no matter how heavy the adrenaline- and emotion-filled magic was pushing at him, it had just gone dead silent out on the hillside at Snape’s words. Everyone seemed to have frozen. Even the water pushing against the shores of the lake had stilled.

“Fine,” Lily said, down below, voice hanging on the moment, staring coldly at Snape, who was back on the ground again. “I won’t bother in the future. And I’d wash your pants if I were you… Snivellus.”

The stillness broke. Breathing. He could breathe. He practically choked for air, and it rushed into his chest, burning like he was inhaling smoke.

“Apologetic to Evans!” James roared, his magic flaring up again as he brandished his wand.

Lily spun towards him. Harry could see two angry red blotches high on her cheeks, could feel the wave of magic as her self-control crumbled. “I don’t want you to make him apologize!” she snarled. “You’re just as bad as he is—”

“What? I’d never call you a—a you-know-what!”

But she took a few steps forward, her wand still clenched tightly in her hand, and James leaned back whether he meant to or not.

“Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you’ve just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can—I’m surprised your broomstick can get off the ground, with that fat head on it. You. Make me. Sick.”

She turned around and pushed past Snape, charging up the hill—towards Harry. He shied back, not daring to face the tears in her eyes, even as below James called after her, and her friends started to gather her bag and shoes, left behind at the lake… He couldn’t bear to look at her, not when he could have stopped that… he could have stopped all of this, have taken a stance against Sirius and his father, and he’d done nothing…

Harry’s attention was pulled back down the slope to another burst of magic. Harry turned to find James and Sirius dangling Snape above them. Harry’s own anger at James, fueled by Lily’s all too apt description, was stirring in his chest again, and he clenched his jaw…

“Right,” James sneered. “Who wants to seem me take off Snivelly’s pants?”

If anyone was laughing this time, Harry didn’t hear it; his feet were pounding down the hill and he jabbed his wand without even thinking about what he was doing—“*EXPPELLIARMUS!*”

James and Sirius pivoted about, but James wand had flown out of his hand and gone soaring off towards the lake. Pettigrew turned to run after it.

“What the—who hell are you?” James demanded, eyes wide with his anger. Above them, Snape’s
body milled about, the rope of magic making his flailing arms useless in displacing him from the air.

Sirius had his wand at eye level, though he hadn’t actually cast anything. “Dudley Harrigan? The new student?” He paused, glancing towards James, but finding only anger there he sneered, twisting his normally handsome face. “Snivellus your little boyfriend, then? That it?”

“Shut up. You call yourselves Gryffindors, but you’re bullies and cowards,” Harry snapped, and he brandished his wand, focussing on the ropelike magic and demanding it to be cut— “Finite Incantatem!”

Snape toppled to the ground again, and Sirius seemed to realize that it was just him against both Snape and Harry now, and flung a hex—Harry dodged it easily, jumping forward over the dazed Slytherin and pushing up his strongest protego against the round of hexes that followed—

He hissed for Snape to get up, but the other boy was tangled in his robes, thrashing about to try and get free. Harry couldn’t hold the shield against many more of the hexes he could feel battering against it, and, thinking quickly, he let it fall, twisting into a new step pattern and shouting flipendo! to send Sirius toppling backwards—

But there was Peter tossing James’ wand, which James snatched out of the air, and it was all Harry could do to cast protego and hold it against the new blast of magic, and—

“WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?”

Harry’s shield fell and toppled forward to his knees. There was sweat dripping down the back of his neck, but he felt cold, strangely, like he had fallen into the lake. Only, there was so much magic in the air it felt like electricity against his skin… like he had fallen into the lake only for the lake to be struck by lightning.

Professor McGonagall was racing down the slope. Professor Finch, the defense teacher, was a step behind her, and the Head Girl, a Hufflepuff, was keeping pace. Before she had even reached them Sirius was crying out—“That berk—he went insane and attacked us—”

“SILENCE!” she snarled.

Harry had forgotten how terrifying McGonagall could be.

“You four—” She gestured towards James, Sirius, Harry, and Snape—Snape, who had finally gotten to his feet, towering over Harry. “—with me. The rest of you, back up to the castle at once. I don’t want to see any more of this behavior out of any of you—NOW!”

Around them, the other fifth years jumped to their feet, hurrying away from the livid McGonagall. Sirius turned to address Remus, who had finally stood from his refuge behind the tree, but James elbowed his friend sharply. As he passed, Harry forced himself to look up. He found Hector staring over his shoulder at him, even as Pandora pulled him away, but then again, so was everyone else.

Shit.

Nice job, Harry, he thought bitterly, staggering to his feet. Don’t get involved, Harry. Let history be, Harry. It'll be easy, Harry.

Shit.

“Professor,” James tried again when the others had mostly cleared off, but she cut him off with a sharp look.
“Wand,” she said shortly. “Now.”

None of them moved at first. But Harry, recognizing his chance to prove his compliance, flipping his wand about to offer it to the Professor handle first. The others followed suit, though the two Gryffindors were glaring at Snape in suspicion.

“I don’t know what sort of bullheaded idiocy drove this—whatever it was that was going on here,” McGonagall said as she stashed the wands in the deep pocket of her robe. “In the middle of OWLs! With guests in the castle! Of all times!”

At the top of the hill, Professor Finch was talking with the examiners, trying to urge them back into the castle, to pay no mind to the silly kids with the OWL stress making them act out. Snape, too, seemed to flinch.

“We are going to see the Headmaster. Immediately. There will be no further nonsense on the way up.” McGonagall’s eyes met each of theirs in turn, and one by one each of them ducked their head under her scrutiny. “Do I make myself clear?”

Four mumbled ‘Yes, Professor’s later, McGonagall turned sharply on her heel and swept up the hill, the boys trailing after her.

Harry tried to keep close to Snape as they followed McGonagall up the stairs, not trusting the way James and Sirius were exchanging glances in silent communication, but Snape seemed completely unaware of his surroundings. His face was lost in the curtains of his hair, and he was limping slightly—not a surprise, with all the falls he had taken. His hands, though, were clenched into tight fists.

Harry wondered if that meant the fight hadn’t gone out of him, or if that was all he could do to hold himself together.

When they reached the Gargoyle statue that marked the Headmaster’s office, McGonagall shooed them up the stairs, though she stayed behind. Unlike Harry’s previous trip to the headmaster’s office, this was a solemn affair. The four boys, trying to keep their two pairs as separate as possible, stood before Dumbledore’s desk in complete silence. The headmaster, hands steepled in front of his beard, regarded them all with tired blue eyes.

“Professor Dumbledore,” James said at last, his voice calm and confident, as though he wasn’t standing in front of the Headmaster for attacking another student. “I would like you to know that Sirius was only defending me. This… Harrigan, he came charging at us out of nowhere, and disarmed me—”

“Oh, lay off,” Harry snapped. “There’s at least thirty witnesses who saw you hex another student for the fun of it—”

“He attacked James!” Sirius said loudly, jumping on his friend’s provided excuse. “I had no way to know what he was going to cast next; James could have been hurt—”

“Even if that were true, you could have just used protego—but it doesn’t matter, you attacked—”

Dumbledore held up a hand, and all of them fell back into silence. Except Snape. He hadn’t said anything in defense to begin with.
“I am very disappointed in the four of you,” Dumbledore said after a deliberate pause. “Hexing each other on the grounds?”

“Snape tried to attack us, Professor,” James insisted.

“He did not, you—”

Dumbledore cut Harry off again, gesturing for James to continue.

“Snape tried to attack us. We had every right to defend ourselves. On top of that, he called Evans a—a…”

James trailed off, apparently unable to voice the slur, but Harry shook his head. “You attacked him. He was minding his own business, and you thought it would be funny to hex him up in front of the girl you wanted to impress. And petrify him. And scourgify him! Merlin, who even does something like—”

“He drew blood!” Sirius retorted. Harry clenched his jaw, meeting the eyes of the man Harry would one day call his godfather as he spewed bullshit in his own defense, clearly not feeling an ounce of remorse for what they’d done. “Everyone knows Sni—Snape’s got more dark curses than the rest of the school combined. Look what he did to James’ face!”

James seemed to have forgotten about that, despite the trail of blood slowly running from the scratch. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, look at this. Proof, he was attacking us—”

“Only because you attacked him!”

“Boys,” Dumbledore said sternly.

“I can prove it, Professor,” Harry insisted. “Ask anyone there. Everyone saw what happened. Ask Lily Evans. Ask—I can give you the memory. Check our wands, if it will help. Every spell was in—”

“Mr. Harrigan!”

Dumbledore actually raised his voice that time, but that wasn’t made Harry’s voice catch in his throat. No, it was the leak in the headmaster’s airtight control, a glimpse of the magic Harry had touched on his very first day, overwhelming and—gone, as quick as it came, leaving only goosebumps on Harry’s arms. Dumbledore sighed, pinching at the bridge of his nose.

“As all four of you are very much aware of, this is no time for petty rivalries and schoolyard brawls,” he said. Quietly, but not gently. “Outside of the walls, you think such things would end with a visit to the headmaster’s office?”

His normally kind blue eyes were narrowed as he regarded them, the light in them faded as his face took on a world-wearied expression Harry had not seen since the nineties.


James and Sirius, at least, looked somewhat chastised, their proud shoulders slouching and faces turning towards the floor. Snape was—Snape was shaking, Harry realized. The cutting magic that had whirled around him in violent anger before was retreating from everything around him: the other students, the headmaster, the magical instruments scattered about the room. And it was coiling itself
tight in the bounds of Snape’s body, where it would fester and grow and lash out again, and it
wouldn’t be satisfied by a cut on James’ cheek.

Harry swallowed, and looked to Dumbledore, the one person who might be able to bring an end to
the vicious cycle, as he stood and turned his back to them, gazing out the window to the world
beyond.

“You boys are almost adults, now,” he said. “Another year and all of you will have the same rights
as any other wizard, but that will come with responsibility. Responsibility to this school, to our
community, and the tenuous peace here. To yourselves. You will realize that soon enough.”

James and Sirius were exchanging glances between one another again, and again it was James who
spoke up, his voice not as strong as it was before. “Sir, has there been news…?”

But he cut himself off. Perhaps because Dumbledore had turned back to them with the grim
expression, or perhaps because Snape and Harry were still in the room. Dumbledore did not address
the question either way.

“The four of you will all serve detention until the end of the term. For the sake of your OWLs, I will
reduce this week to Saturday alone, but when your tests are over, you will report every single day. Is
that understood?”

“Sir—the quidditch cup—”

Dumbledore’s flat gaze fell on James, effectively cutting him off.

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Black, you will report to Professor McGonagall. Mr. Snape, Mr. Harrigan;
Professor Slughorn.” The two Gryffindors nodded slowly. Snape hadn’t shown that he had
processed any of this conversation at all. Harry, while no stranger to unjust punishments, wasn’t
going to just pretend that wasn’t what was happening, so he didn’t give any response. “For the
remainder of your OWLs, when you are not in the Great Hall, you will return directly to the Library
or your Common Rooms. That includes you, Mr. Harrigan.”

He got the message. Dumbledore knew, apparently, of his habit of visiting Hani. He would have to
take his meals in the Great Hall with the rest of the school or not at all.

Dumbledore gave them one final look. “You will understand exactly what you have done far too
soon, I fear,” he said gravely. “But for now, go to lunch. Your practical exam is in less than an hour.
Mr. Harrigan, stay behind.”

Harry’s ears burned as the other three boys scuffled out of the office in silence. When the door
clicked shut behind them, the Headmaster sank back into his chair with a sigh. Fawkes the phoenix
trilled from his perch.

“Professor, they were—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Mr. Harrigan.”

“Snape didn’t do anything, he—”

“In self-defense or no, that sort of violent spellcasting is not allowed at Hogwarts. Nor are
discriminatory slurs.

“Fine, but he doesn’t deserve the same punishment as the two who—”
“I’d appreciate it if you respected your headmaster’s decision, Mr. Harrigan.”

Harry flinched. Why did he keep using that name? He, of all people, knew it wasn’t Harry’s real name. “Then you want me to stay silent, when—”

“Frankly, I am astounded you would get involved in this at all, considering your situation.”

“My situation? It’s because of my—You think I can just sit by and watch things happen—”

But Dumbledore’s silencing hand came up again, and Harry bit back his words. This side of Dumbledore was the one he’d so loathed in 1996, the Dumbledore uninterested in the reality of Harry’s situation, unwilling to hear what he had to say. And why shouldn’t he be? He didn’t have any reason to give Harry special attentions. Even, apparently, when two Gryffindors could get off with a slap on the wrist for… everything they had done to Snape. Humiliation did not begin to cover it. Had Sirius sent him to the Shrieking Shack on the full moon, yet? Would Dumbledore care at all?

“After this incident, I’m sure several of your professors might revise their statements on your transcripts, which were forwarded along with your application to the Research Library. I’m not even sure I should let you go if this is how you find it suiting to conduct yourself.”

“Sir, you can’t—”

“As it were, you have already been accepted.”

Dumbledore produced from his desk a thick, cream-colored envelope stamped with the Research Library’s shield coat of arms, and pushed it across his desk towards Harry. “While your peers gather on the Hogwarts Express, you will floo directly to Oxford. The house elf Hani will be going along with you to ensure your security and health, and, apparently, your behavior. And you will behave respectfully, as a representative of Hogwarts as Britain’s foremost Academic Institution. Do I make myself clear?”

Harry picked up the envelope, turning it over in his hands. This was his chance to find answers, answers that could potentially get him home, to when he belonged. No matter what had happened today, no matter how much he wanted to argue with Dumbledore, he was not going to ruin that chance. “Crystal, sir.”

“Very well.” Dumbledore looked up at him pensively for a moment that seemed to drag out far longer than it could have really lasted. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. “Do mind what friends and enemies you make, Harry. If this summer does not reveal your answers to you, you are going to need to make peace with permanent residence. I would be careful what path I choose if I were you.”

Make peace with… No, Harry refused to accept that, even if Dumbledore seemed to believe it was an ultimatum. Harry stood, tucking the envelope into his bag and his arguments into his throat, and turned away, leaving the office in silence.

He found Snape lingering at the bottom of the spiral staircase, still deathly pale, but at least not shaking as badly as he had been before. Still, at the sight of him, Harry had to restrain the urge to stomp back up the stairs and give Dumbledore a piece of his mind. He didn’t even like Snape, but
“Are you…” Harry started, but he cut himself off. It was a stupid question. Of course Snape wasn’t okay, and it really was none of his business. If Snape wanted to talk about what had happened, it probably wouldn’t be with some random Ravenclaw with a hero complex. Snape wasn’t even looking at him. Harry shook his head and shouldered his bag, eager to get somewhere he could cool off before the practical. “Sorry about that. See you in detention.”

“Why did you do that?”

Harry, mid-step, paused. “What?”

He watched over his shoulder as Snape seemed to peel himself away from the wall, dark eyes glinting up at Harry as he took a few steps forward. “Why?” Snape repeated.

Harry blinked, trying to reconcile the question with his assumptions and the monotone, shuttered way Snape had asked it. He turned back fully, meeting Snape’s dark eyes. “Why did I do what?” he clarified. “Try to defend my actions? Try to avoid detention?”

“Why did you get involved at all?”

Harry stiffened. “Would you rather I didn’t? Should I have done what Dumbledore wanted, and just —”

He stopped and took a deep breath, and remembered his occlumency, tucking his anger away somewhere else. Snape’s look had turned into a glare, and that reminded Harry—this was Snape he was talking to. If there was ever a person wired more differently from Harry than Snape, he’d yet to find them, so it was likely the Slytherin boy legitimately did not understand.

Besides, Harry wasn’t looking to start a fight. He’d already gotten too involved.

“I don’t like bullies,” he said bluntly. “And no matter what Professor Dumbledore says, that’s what they are, and there is no excuse to let it happen. No one deserves that. Even people spouting prejudiced bullshit.”

Snape actually flinched at his words, retreating behind his wall of hair. Harry was ready to turn away again, now that he’d given his answer, but before he could Snape spoke again, voice barely audible. “I didn’t mean to call her that.”

For a moment, Harry thought he had misheard. “What?”

“I didn’t mean. To call. Her. That.”

There was the vitriol Harry remembered.

He knew he was staring. This was Snape, and while Harry thought anyone who flung around ‘mudblood’ would get what was coming to them in the long run, it wasn’t exactly surprising to hear the slur come from Snape’s mouth. He was unpleasant, exactly the type to hold other people accountable for things they had zero control over, and for whatever reason he’d gone and joined the Death Eaters. Even if he’d apparently turned spy later, you didn’t just join the Death Eaters without believing Voldemort’s brand of blood-purist bullshit.

So forgive him if Harry found Snape’s insistence out of character. “Okay…” he said slowly. “I mean… I don’t really know you, so I’ll leave you to be the judge of that.”
Snape pulled back, like a dog reeling to snarl, but instead they just sort of stared at each other for a moment, eye-to-eye. Harry held back a shiver, unwillingly reminded of the last time he’d made prolonged eye contact with Snape. Just before the man tore into his brain with legilimency, again. It wasn’t a pleasant thing to remember.

But he pushed the memory back down where it couldn’t haunt him, because something in Snape’s wording struck him as odd. “You didn’t mean to call her that because you don’t believe it, or you didn’t mean to call her that because it’s her?”

Snape’s silence spoke far more than any words he ever spat at Harry. A sort of nausea twisted his stomach, a feeling of dread crawling up his spine, like he had learned too much, guessed too well… He tried to shove it down with the memory, but the hole he hid things from himself in was getting awfully crowded. “Well, you should probably apologize, either way. It’s none of my business, though.”

He tried to turn again, to run, but Snape’s hand, surprisingly fast, shot out and snagged his arm. “You didn’t say why,” the boy repeated.

He was less intimidating when he was only a few inches taller than Harry, rather than a foot. “Yes, actually, I did. I don’t like bullies. Clear enough? That’s it. End of story.”

Snape scowled. “You’re a Ravenclaw, not some idiot Gryffindor. Ravenclaws don’t go running into fights like that, not if they didn’t get something out of it. You’re supposed to be smarter than that.”

“And yet, here we are. Would you let go of me? As Dumbledore said, we’ve only got lunch before the practical, and I’d like to get something to eat.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed, but his grip loosened and Harry pulled away. He turned, again — and he really meant to leave, this time—but Snape wasn’t done.

“I’ll tutor you.”

“What?”

“You. I’ll tutor you. For the Potions OWL, on Monday. Slughorn said you were worried about it.”

Harry frowned, trying to remember when Slughorn might have brought that up in front of Snape. The holidays, he supposed, but he was surprised Snape would remember something like that. “I’ve gotten plenty of practice, helping you with the infirmary stores,” he said. “Besides, Dumbledore said we’ve got detention with Slughorn. It’ll probably be more of the same.”

“Your stirring technique is terrible,” Snape said blandly. “And you haven’t got a sense for which measurements need to be precise, and I’d bet you can’t parse a symbolic formula without checking the reference table. I’ll tutor you…” He paused. “While we are in detention. I can get your grade up a whole mark. I helped sixth years prepare last year, and seventh years before that. You’re not half as hopeless as the ones who ask for help from a third year.”

Harry stared. He wasn’t entirely certain, but it sounded almost like Snape had given Harry a... complement. A terribly buried, almost even insulting, grudging, yet freely given complement. “You don’t even like me,” Harry pointed out. “What exactly do you get out of this.”

“Debt. Agree, and you’ll consider my debt paid.”

Snape meant… well, Harry wasn’t sure what exactly he was trying to imply about Harry’s character, but if he wanted to insult Harry he would have just made his point directly. That didn’t mean Harry
wasn’t offended, though.

“You don’t owe me anything. I made my choice to get involved. That it happened to be you there was… coincidental? Inconsequential?” Whatever the word he was looking for, it wasn’t entirely true. Had it not been Snape and a situation which Harry was already so intimately aware of, he might have been able to avoid charging into the fray. He meant what he said, though, so he repeated it: “You owe me nothing.”

Snape scowled. “Whether or not you admit to it now, I will not have this hanging over my head. I will not wait for you to call on this… this incident as blackmail!”

Harry gaped. If Snape was this paranoid as a teenager, then suddenly Snape’s attitude as an adult made more sense… the resentment Dumbledore had told him Snape felt for James having saved his life… if he was this worried about owing a debt to Harry, he couldn’t imagine what a life debt to James Potter would feel like…

And apparently Snape was deluded into thinking Harry was some kind of, well, vindictive Slytherin. Considering he was surrounded by that sort of person, Harry could almost understand, but… then again, this was Snape. Harry didn’t think he would ever really understand someone like Snape. He didn’t even want to, really.

Snape took his silence as confusion, and let out an irritated huff through flared nostrils. “As you stand to benefit from my offer, I would advise that you take it, Harrigan.”

“Harry,” He corrected automatically, and just as quickly bit down on his tongue. He didn’t care what Snape called him! “Look, sure, fine. If you want to help me out, I’m not going to stop you. We’ve got detention Saturday, and I imagine you wouldn’t want to waste the study time, anyways. But what exactly do you get out of this? What do you want from me?”

Snape’s eyes went wide for a moment, eyebrows arching up towards his hairline, but then Harry saw it—the pull that seemed to tug one side of his mouth up into an almost imperceptible smirk. Harry had seen it before, in their occlumency lessons, when Harry’s inability to hold his tongue had for once seemed to amuse the impossible man. As it had then, Harry was certain the expression spelled for Harry that he had just stepped into a trap. Of some sort. Likely he would never find out what, since Snape was a secretive bastard.

“There is still another week of OWLs,” Snape said after a moment.

“…and?”

“And I would prefer to get through them with my dignity intact!”

Harry took a wary step back. “What do you expect me to do about that? I already stepped in once. Hell, I argued with the bloody Headmaster, and a fat lot of good that did.”

“Exactly,” said Snape, straightening up out of his usual hunch, gaining another few inches on Harry. It still wasn’t as impressive as his adult glower, but he seemed to enjoy looking down his nose at people. “You’ve given a fight.”

“You want a bodyguard.”

And just as quickly, Snape ruined the image by rolling his eyes. “Nothing so involved. Simply a… deterrent. As if Potter”—he spat out the name in so familiar a manner Harry almost flinched, though it wasn’t directed towards him—“would dare pick a fight with someone who would fight back.”
“He didn’t mind fighting against you.”

Snape sneered. “Two on one, even if they’re only half a wizard between them—my point remains. I have revisions to focus on, and no time to waste watching my back.”

“So I get a revisions partner, and you get a meat shield.”

Snape’s smirk widened. A hair. Maybe even two.

“I’m already part of a study group,” Harry said flatly. “And after what you shouted at Lily… Evans today, I don’t think you’re welcome there.”

Snape seemed torn between scowling and expressing real guilt. “I’ll apologize.”

“You should, but I still don’t think you’d be welcome.” Harry shifted his bag to his other shoulder. “I think Hector would just as soon punch you in the face. And besides, it would be a rather… political statement. For both of us.”

Snape scoffed. “You don’t care what anyone thinks of you.”

Technically, Harry supposed that was true. It was more that they thought of him at all that was the problem.

“I don’t either,” Snape continued, which was a lie if Harry had ever heard one, but maybe he meant it in the same way as Harry did. They attention they received for sticking together would be less dreadful than the attention he would surely receive from the Marauders if they did not. “Politically, aside from this one encounter, you’re about as much of a nobody as exists at Hogwarts. You aren’t a member of any clubs or teams—and you won’t be able to meet up with your group, anyways. We’ve been restricted to the Great Hall and Library. If you want to prepare for the rest of your OWLs, you’ll be doing it without them.”

Harry was tempted to ask how Snape could be certain they didn’t meet in Ravenclaw tower, but he suspected he knew the answer. Lily.

And there it was, that lingering bit of curiosity that wormed its way out whenever his parents were mentioned, itching to find out how close Snape and his mother really were. Was it a one-sided, creepy obsession on Snape’s part? That seemed unlikely since she’d jumped to help Snape—and Slughorn had said they were potions partner—and he’d seen them in the library together, heads ducked over shared papers…

“Fine,” he said, though he had a feeling he was going to regret it. “I stick with you during OWLs, you help me with potions. That’s the deal, Snape?”

“That is the deal, Harrigan,” Snape agreed. He looked pleased.

“Then call me Harry, please. We’ll be seeing a lot of each other, in detentions, and all.”

Snape’s smirk twisted off into an expression bizarre and undefinable. “This doesn’t make us friends, I hope you realize.”

Harry bit back his automatic retort, I don’t suppose you have many of those, because it stood to reason that the number had gone from one to zero today and Harry wasn’t cruel enough to rub that in. Besides, here, he was just the same, just like he had been in muggle school—except for Hani. “Harry’s what I go by. ‘Harrigan’ is a mouthful, and it’s my relatives’ name more than mine, anyways.”
Snape kept staring at him, but at last he turned away, shuffling about a bit. “Then you may call me Severus if you must,” he said, and he produced something out of his robes—Harry’s wand.

“Hey! Where did you—”

“Professor McGonagall gave them back when we came down,” the other boy said, his smirk returning in full mocking force. “You were in such a rush you would have forgotten all about it. ‘Meat shield’ is about the only use I’m going to get out of you, I’m afraid. Honestly, how is someone like you in Ravenclaw?”

~

Chapter End Notes

Phew. This actually marks an end to 'part one of part one', which is the shortest part of part one, which... will probably make more sense once I post the next chapter.

Speaking of which: there's going to be a bit of a jump between this chapter and next, so don't be alarmed when that happens. There's some stuff we're going to move quickly over in order to get to the main plot of this fic.

(Wait, Noa, we haven't gotten to that yet? I hear you ask. To which I say: well, sort of. You didn't think I was going to drop Harry in the 70s and then just gloss over the political moment, did you? ...did you? I hope not. Voldemort is character number three for a reason. we'll get there, don't you fret.)

Yes, there was a cricketer named Dudley Evans. No, Rowling probably didn't have him in mind, "but he supposed the name 'Dudley' had to come from somewhere."

Also, one final note - since this fic mainly sticks to Harry's P.o.V., there are Things happening off screen. I played with the idea of explaining Dumbledore's motivations here a bit more, but since that is going to come up next chapter it would be pointless to do it twice. So if you think he's a bit OoC, a) I totally see where you are coming from and b) hold that thought until next chapter.

ANYHOW. Thank you, as usual, for feedback, and I'd love to hear from more of you!
Comments are an elixir of life for this long-winded author's tired soul!
Sometimes, in the small hours of the morning, when sleep has been reached for and missed for days on end and the usual constraints on thoughts to the plausible have fallen away, it is possible that the mind may open to larger things. The slow and steady turn of the Earth, the smallness of self in relation to the stars, and greatness of self in relation to atoms; the vastness of the mind to contain and comprehend the known universe. And, once the mind considers this impossible contrast of scale, there comes a point where it thinks—if all that can fit into this tiny human brain, then who is to say it can’t fit other things as well: unseen colors, minds, and souls… and maybe, yes, maybe even magic?

This is ridiculous, of course. Usually, around this point the brain shunts the mind off to sate its hunger for the incomprehensible in dreams, and when it wakes again if it remembers such thoughts they will it remembers them as madness.

It’s not that the human mind can’t comprehend these things. No, no, quite the opposite; it is simply that comprehending them creates problems. When looking into others’ minds, for example, the trouble is that the two set of thoughts are then aligned, at which point there ceases to be ‘others’, and separating back out again can be quite tricky. Magic, similarly, is like air and the sounds of the body the mind filters out in hopes of actually getting somewhere in life. It is possible to fit galaxies inside a mind, yes, but that is only because the depth of understanding is so shallow. Layering magic onto the world adds a dimension that makes the simplest existence complex, like looking at a forest and then seeing every tree, every leaf, every cell and chloroplast. And, like colors unknown, for the most of humanity it lies past the threshold of being useful. What point is there in sensing magic; far more practical to use it.

It is not a surprise, then, that Harry had a headache.

For Harry, the magic didn't come from too many nights without sleep—although he was in need of a solid eighteen-hour rest to recover from his recent bad habits—and he certainly hadn’t taken any mind-altering substances or gone looking for it. If he had wanted to sense magic, there were methods (ill-advised and dangerous, but that was human innovation for you) and those methods were like controlling a faucet: fill your cup and turn it back off again before it spills out over the brim. Harry’s sense had started more like a crack in a dam, and no matter how much metaphorical duct tape he applied, inevitably a flood would tear through and widen the gap.

A flood like several hundred magical children, out of practice after a summer of letting their magic run wild with no spells to bind it to their control. Such was Hogwarts, and hence, Harry’s headache.

It was September 1st, again, and Harry had been stuck in the past for one year, one month, and thirty days. That was four hundred twenty-seven days of searching for a way home. Today marked the beginning of his second school year away from his contemporaries, and it was just as uncomfortable as the first. And, on top of everything else—

"You weren’t on the train."

Harry opened his eyes, irritated at having his monolog interrupted.
Just as quickly, he wished he hadn’t; there, hurrying up the stairs Harry was loitering atop, was Severus Snape. He was less intimidating as a gangly teenager, robes threadbare without any more hem to let out to account to cover his knobbly ankles, than as the acerbic professor layered in black swathes tailored for swooping, but he wasn’t exactly easy on the eyes either way, and the the foyer to Great Hall had been all lit up for the Welcoming and put his sharp nose and oily black hair in stark relief.

“’lo, Severus,” said Harry, reminding himself that ugly or not, this wasn’t the vile Professor Snape, just a boy with a hunger for information. “How was the trip?”

“Immeasurably mind-numbing.” Reaching the top step, Severus cast a loathsome glare down the steps, to where the crowd was milling about, slow to make their way into the hall. “Where the hell were you? How did you get out of it?”

“Arrived last night,” Harry explained. “Flooed directly in from Oxford. It would’ve been a hassle to go all the way to London just to ride the train.”

Severus’s nostrils flared, but it was as likely to be in appreciation of the smells from the kitchen, which had by now permeated the whole castle, as it was to be an expression of discontent. “Well,” he said impatiently. “Did you bring it?”

Harry sighed.

Harry had spent the summer at the Oxford Magical Research Library, immersing himself in the largest collection of wizarding books, records, scrolls, tablets, and artefacts in all of Europe, amassed by trade or conquest from all over the world, searching in desperate hope for a means to send himself back to his own time. If Hogwarts or Oxford had a book in English that touched on time magic in any way, Harry had read it… or at least enough to assess its worth to his research.

But that was only the books in English. He devoured those; the books that were not went much, much slower. As far as languages went, Harry was fluent in English and passable at translating Latin and disambiguous Runic—so long as he had a dictionary and grammatical reference sheet on hand. Enough had been written in French, German, or, worst of all, lost dialects with few written examples only parsable by working backwards from modern descendents, which Harry quite simply did not have time for.

Nor did he have time for much of anything, really, except to arrive first thing the morning and bury himself to the neck in notes and leave when the last librarian locked the doors at ten o’clock PM, and pour over his notes for the day over whatever supper Hani made for him until he fell asleep and started it all over again, and, when he mentioned he was doing translations to one of the librarians, he learned that if he followed a certain format he could get paid to give his notes to the library, and then he had to squeeze in formatting that, too, since Hani said there wasn’t enough gold in his scholarship to keep him eating all summer long. He certainly did not have the time—or energy—for the surprising number of letters he had received, letters from Hector, who’d even coaxed him out to lunch when he visited with his father one afternoon, and Pandora, who’d written like clockwork on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays until one week Harry realized she hadn’t written at all, and even
a letter from Cat Sanchez, who’d been eager to confirm that he’d gotten an ‘O’ on his herbology OWL.

And he definitely did not have time to go running around the library digging up archaic potions journals. But Severus had been persistent—and to tell the truth, Harry had let him get away with it, fueled with guilt over his father’s behavior and a sort of morbid curiosity over what made Professor Snape turn out the way he did. And there had been the owl he used to send letters four, even five times a week, which lurked around the apartment complex until Harry sent a reply and had a tendency to bite. Harry wasn’t even sure where Severus was getting the owl from, since apparently he lived in a thoroughly muggle town. His father’s town, because yes, Severus Snape, future head of Slytherin House, Death Eater, and all-around nightmare was apparently a halfblood.

And apparently Harry had let something of his curiosity slip, because next thing he knew Severus was mixing bits of personal information in with his adulations and diatribes of trivial potions matters that Harry barely cared about, and Severus Snape never let anything slip unless he very well meant to. And now Harry knew that he came from a town called Cokeworth, and that he’d gone to a muggle primary school before Hogwarts even though his mum was a pureblood witch and could have schooled him the ‘normal’ way, and that his father worked at the mill when there was work to be done and otherwise spent his time drinking, and that even if it was his mother who had been the witch, Severus had really learned to brew when his father was sober enough to make his own beer or set his son stealing apples from around town for cider or, if the season was wrong or the year bad, to gather dandelions from all the empty lots where people had planned to build before they realized there was no coal to dig in Cokeworth.

Severus’s demand in return for these tidbits, which Harry had decided very early on he absolutely would not respond to, was not made explicit until the last two weeks of the holiday, when Severus was apparently invited to spend two weeks at Malfoy Manor. And it came with a more tangible bribe—a quill charmed to take dictation, recording what was recited to it in a neat, steady writing. Harry was tempted to send it back, but it had been a very good bribe, as the end of Harry’s stay at the OMRL was coming to a close and he was already missing the access to materials he had been granted. And the request had been simple enough, and Severus had practically begged him. And so Harry spent a morning producing a copy of a paper by an alchemist of some renown to bring back to him. Harry hadn’t been able to make heads or tails of it, but he’d done as asked, though Severus’s owl hadn’t returned.

“I don’t have it now,” he replied, almost amused at how Severus was looking Harry up and down as though it might be sticking out of his robes somewhere. “It’s up in my trunk with my other notes. I’ll get it to you at breakfast.”

Severus visibly deflated. If Harry had thought to bring it, he just knew Severus would have spent the whole feast with his eyes glued to the parchment, and had in fact probably been hoping for the distraction. “Fine,” Severus said. “But tomorrow, you’re telling me everything about Oxford.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You know as much as I do, after all those letters.”

“You’re a scant writer. Everything.”

“We’ll see.” Harry stretched his arms out and turned his head this way and that, trying to get rid of the persistent kink in his neck he’d picked up after a few weeks hunched over books. “We’re starting NEWT classes, you know. There might not be any time.”

That was what Harry was afraid of. Funny, here he was, twenty years early to everything he was supposed to be doing, and yet he never had enough time.
For all the resources at the OMRL, all the books and journals to reference and professional researchers to learn from, all the freedom to throw himself into his search with only minimal distraction, Harry had returned to Hogwarts with only a folder full of papers and ink-stained fingers to show for it. If he wanted to write the competition for *An Extended History of Time and Other Subtle Changes*, he would be well on his way to a first draft. He did not want to—in fact, nothing would make him happier than emptying his notes in the kitchens’ giant fireplace and watching them turn to ash, never to be read or thought of ever again. But Harry needed them. All that work, and they were all he had.

He did not, however, voice his growing desperation to anyone, and definitely not Dumbledore. He had never had Hermione’s inherent faith in authority figures to begin with, and while Dumbledore seemed to have forgotten that they had parted on bad terms, Harry had not. He’d been the one to spend the last weeks of term scrubbing cauldron and brewing calming and sleep draughts for Slughorn, and he’d been the one to stand with Severus against his own father, and he’d been the one to feel Sirius’s regard turn from indifference to disgust. Dumbledore—this Dumbledore—had no reason to pay mind the troubles of one wizard trying to solve an impossible problem that was only dire to him. If in the nineties, when Dumbledore professed to care about Harry, he had no trouble turning his back when all Harry wanted was answers, why one earth should Harry expect anything less than that now?

So instead, when settled into a plush arm chair with a cup of tea and asked about how his summer had gone, Harry answered with great diplomacy: “It has been a unique experience, and I’ve learned a lot from it.”

Dumbledore paused, opening his mouth ever so slightly, the steam from his tea rising up to fog his crescent-moon glasses. Harry took a sip of his own, hoping it was caffeinated—he would need it to stay awake after cramming several sleepless nights into his last week with access to the collection—and winced as he burnt his tongue.

“I see,” said Dumbledore mildly, though the way he spoke it sounded more like a thousand and one unanswered questions rather than a confirmation of anything. “I’m glad to hear it.”

They sat in silence for a moment, each with their tea, and Harry felt his resolve loosen somewhat. Dumbledore had gone out of his way to get Harry to the OMRL; regardless of their personal tension Harry owed him a proper report. “I didn’t find a way home,” he offered, looking into his tea. “I read… everything, as much as I could get my hands on in two and a half months, but there just wasn’t enough time.”

“I’m sure you’ve done your best,” Dumbledore said, relaxing into sympathy. “In fact, I’ve heard it. Miss Shirazi was quite impressed with your potential as a researcher, and led me to believe that the librarians are interested in having you return next summer.”

“Really?” said Harry, surprised. He might not have been, had he stopped to consider it, but he hadn’t had time.

“Would you be interested?”

“Of course.” That, Harry didn’t need any time to consider. “There’s still more research to be done. I
“Yes, she mentioned that you were being paid for code transcription. Out of curiosity, my boy, have you kept a list of the works you have consulted thus far?”

“Uh, yeah…” Harry balanced his tea on the arm of the chair and pulled out the worn leather portfolio Hani had liberated from the Oxford lost property. One of the librarians had charmed it to expand to hold his whole ream of notes, making it an invaluable tool for keeping Harry’s ever-expanding collection of materials accessible. The particular sheet he needed was near the front, folded several times over itself as he had spellotaped additional pages on to keep his list assembled.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose as he scanned it, pausing every now and then to consider Harry, until at last he asked, “You have read all of these?”

“At least the pages listed,” Harry said. It was well over one hundred fifty books, but he’d listed everything, even the books that only had a single footnote of any relevance to his search. Some of the books he’d even listed just to mark that he should not bother coming back to them in the future. Each entry had been annotated precisely enough that even Hermione would have been impressed by the document, though she would have been more impressed that he’d read it all.

“Some of these I recognize as being double coded—anything by Aubrey-Weber is almost inscrutable to even the most advanced researcher. You only began studying runes last year.”

“I’ve had the motivation,” he said with a shrug. “And those are at least coded from English, even the Aubrey journal. The trouble were the ones in German… apparently Grindelwald devoted a huge amount of gold to funding experimental magics, and there were a handful of theoreticians looking into time travel but… One of the librarians offered to connect me with a German graduate student from the muggle side, but I just didn’t have time…”

“Well,” said Dumbledore, passing back the list with a smile. “I dare say this makes you something of an expert on the subject. I have been keeping my eyes and ears peeled, but most everyone with an interest in the subject has either gone into private research or some other field entirely.”

Harry winced, a habit gained from listening in on the librarians’ tea room gossip. ‘Private research’ was an insult to academia, at least according to the librarians. It was a label for honest scholars who had succumbed to positions at the Ministry or, Merlin forbid, companies. The draw was the funding, which was enough to overrule the dishonor they faced when their academic contemporaries considered them sellouts. Most of their research was so jealously guarded by their owners that it never saw the light of day. To the librarians of the OMRL, who believed firmly in the goal of collecting all information and making it available to anyone with a respectable cause (and gold to pay a pittance to sustain the collection), the idea of intentionally holding research hostage was practically blasphemy.

“Just because there’s only a limited number of researchers interested in time magic doesn’t make me an expert,” Harry said, turning his wince into a shake of his head. “‘Expert’ implies that I would have, well, expert knowledge. The only thing I know for certain is that I really don’t know anything about time magic at all.”

“Yes, learning does have a knack for revealing the breadth of our ignorance.”

“Er, sure, but…” Harry set his cup down on the arm of his chair and picked at his nails. “What I mean is, I can point you to probably twenty different accounts of the incident of Eloise Mintumble. That’s a witch who caused a time incident in 1899, well recorded. There’s newspaper articles, a few journals recording the double Tuesday, and she’s mentioned in a book or two…”
“I remember that,” Dumbledore said, swirling his tea and looking his age. “Though… it’s lost among other events.”

Harry frowned. He wasn’t rightly sure when Dumbledore had been born, or what else had happened in 1899, but he supposed it wasn’t worth investigation. After all...

“We have all those accounts, and we can be fairly certain that it did happen, the double Tuesday, which is at least more than can be said for half the incidents I’ve read about—but I’d give a galleon to anyone who could find two sources that give the same story of exactly what happened. And you think there would be more sources, but even in the records of people who were studying time magic when it happened, some of them seemed to have missed it. Mostly people seem to have lost track of the memory, like you. It happened, but it’s like… a story you heard from someone else.

“So either a Ministry cover-up with no public documentation—only, it seems unlikely when there’s Daily Prophet articles about it kept in several public archives, see? Or maybe Time and Magic stitched themselves back together with no human input at all, and the memories faded naturally, to prevent anyone from looking into it too closely and recreating it and… and that’s a whole branch of magical theory I’d really rather not spell with a ten-inch wand.”

“I can see how that would hinder your progress.”

“Hinder? More like completely block. How am I supposed to research something when… they managed to bring her forward in time again, you know that? She’d been stuck in the past, and whatever they did, that was what created the second Tuesday. But there’s not a single hint as to how, or who ‘they’ are, only that she’d been recovered at the ministry. She might have even figured out how to travel again on her own, and there’s no record of it.”

Harry sighed, slumping back into the armchair. The day he’d realized the inconsistencies in the Mintumble incident, he’d left the library, gone for a long walk, then asked Hani to soundproof the flat so he could scream his frustration. Neither activity had really helped.

“And that’s a well-documented case,” he added, as Dumbledore didn’t seem to have followed him into his frustration. “It’s the only well-documented case of it’s type. Erasing people from existence? And other people being aware that they had been erased, at least until the mass amnesia set in? If this were a muggle incident, there’s be a philosophical revolution. Only, apparently the muggles entirely missed the extra Tuesday. Them and half the wizarding world.”

“You’ve found other incidents to look into, though, judging by this list.”

“Yes, but… I’m getting absolutely nowhere. Another I’d say is relatively likely… as in, it was reported in the newspapers. But the source you’d think would be really useful, the journal of one of the three people involved who actually wrote about the incident? He coded it on three levels…”

And Harry, who’d not had anyone but Hani to explain his research to all summer, went on to describe the code, which involved transliteration of the roman letters into runes which had been shifted out of their standard transcription alignment but still maintained their spell-forming meanings, and homonyms and anagrams not clearly indicated by the text, sections structured in odd poetic meter with rhyme schemes intentionally broken to indicate additional levels of meaning, and points where the author had rearranged the pages so the sentences that flowed between them were grammatically correct but made no logical sense. Harry had spent a whole week working on transcribing that journal, and was still uncertain if he had done so correctly, and had been so fed up with wrapping his head around the cypher he’d hardly even tried to parse out the additional levels of information. The librarian he reported to, Dumbledore’s friend Shirazi, had seen his literal tears on the parchment he’d handed over and talked the Head of Translation into including a bit of extra gold
in his fee. It had done little to curb Harry’s frustration.

“My dear boy,” Dumbledore had said sympathetically when Harry had managed to knock his tea to the ground with irate gesticulating, banishing the mess with a flick of his wrist that made Harry’s teeth buzz with magic. “You knew there was a possibility it would come to this. But don’t let it upset you! Miss Shirazi’s glowing review aside, your OWL scores were fantastic. Exceeds Expectations and above, and Outstandings in Defense, Charms, and Potions all three—you haven’t even sat for runes yet, but are already doing paid scholarly translation, so we may very well expect an Outstanding there, as well.”

Harry’s ears burned. “It doesn’t amount to anything, though. Even after this summer… all the OMRL’s resources, and I’m still stuck here.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore said gently. “It may be time to consider this as permanent.”

At that, Harry scowled, jumped to his feet, and started pacing. What did Dumbledore know? He wasn’t the one who’d barely seen the light of day for being neck-deep in research. He wasn’t the one whose fitful hours of sleep were filled with friends he longed to see again. “I can’t accept that, sir,” he said flatly. “I am not going to live my life as a lie, and I am not going to leave my friends to…”

But he couldn’t finish that sentence, because he couldn’t tell Dumbledore that Voldemort was back without telling him he’d been disembodied in the first place, and he just knew that if he let on how involved in that mess Harry was he’d want to use him in the current conflict. And even if he didn’t, he’d use what information Harry let slip, and that information would be enough to destroy Harry’s future.

Possibly. The seed of doubt rooted in Harry’s mind had sprouted at the OMRL. Beyond the various arguments he had read and theorized himself, it all seemed rather conceited, to expect the path of the world was at all dependent on his actions. Then again, he was Harry bloody Potter… even if no one knew what that meant yet.

“That is good to hear. It’s not healthy for a young man to be so alone.”

Harry closed his eyes. He could practically see the face Hermione would treat him too, warning him to keep his temper. With one final prickly stroke for Fawkes, ignoring the way the phoenix’s powerful magic made his arm feel like a pincushion at the touch. “I’m still going to try stay out of anything major, but if talking to someone is really enough to change the whole future of the world, then I’ve already changed things too much.”

“That is good to hear. It’s not healthy for a young man to be so alone.”

Harry closed his eyes. He could practically see the face Hermione would treat him too, warning him to keep his temper. With one final prickly stroke for Fawkes, he returned to the armchair, resisting the urge to slump. This wasn’t his Dumbledore. It wasn’t worth it to get angry; this Dumbledore would just brush it off with the same disregard he’d given to Harry’s shouting about the James-Sirius-Severus incident.

“I’m not going to give up, though,” he went on. “I’m still doing translation work, and the journal I’m working through—the wizard was actually a spell crafter. It’s a different way of thinking, but if I can make sense of it, learn from it… Well, you told me once I would have to make my own way home.”

“Spell crafting is dangerous work,” Dumbledore mused.
Harry barely held back a snort. “You would know. Sir.”

“Yes.” The headmaster smiled in that way all people over a certain age seem to know how to, which could reduce the young to guilt over their self-absorption in a heartbeat. Harry shifted uncomfortably, but did not apologize, and Dumbledore didn’t wait for him to. “Well, if that is your decision, then so be it. I cannot and would not ask you to leave it.”

“Thank you.”

“However. When you do accept a future here… I would ask that you let me know, Harry. Until then, I will continue to keep my eyes and ears open, and the memory dampening potion will stay in my cupboard.”

Something about the way he said it made Harry uncomfortable, something more than Dumbledore’s apparent assumption that he would fail. He left quickly, after that, and spent the whole morning of September first working on his translation. It was all the defiance he could spare the time for.

But then the train pulled into Hogsmeade, and he felt the wards around Hogwarts ripple as one by one the thestral-drawn carriages ferried the students through the gates. Hani found him staring out the window of the little room off Ravenclaw tower, eyes fixed on the lanterns swaying along in a curving path across the grounds, and took his hand gently, a pulse of magic passing between them to draw Harry back to himself. And then, satisfied that he had recovered, she banished his work and ordered him down to the Great Hall for the feast.

“Master Harry is needing to be seeing his friends,” she said firmly. “Master Harry is spending all summer just with his books and he is needing a celebration and good food and proper sleep.”

“But I had you, Hani,” he tried to protest. It was a useless argument, as always, and he was tired enough that he hardly put up a fight before her inevitable win. And once she did, he stood, stretched, and made his way slowly towards the Great Hall, bemoaning the growing headache all the way.

Now, he watched as Peeves came swooping out with a bucket of water, which sloshed onto the students gathered below. Someone let out a scream, and Harry resisted the urge to echo the sound. The ghosts were, in essence, magic without physical containers, halfway manifested and partially tangible. They always triggered a certain chill when he felt them appear, like walking through an unexpected fog, even from across the hall. He shuddered, rubbing down goosebumps on his arms, and winced as the older students restarted their drying charms and the younger ones grumbled about how they were already drenched from the rain. One even sent a hex after the poltergeist, though it flew past its target and collided with a suit of armor, and then the armor jumped to attention, brandishing its spear and trying to find its attacker until McGonagall pushed through and charmed it back into place.

Had Harry really thought Hogwarts would be his much-needed break? Of course the OMRL had its share of magic, but it had been quiet, and if Harry needed to close his eyes and regain his composure all he had to do was slip off into one of the reading nooks warded to help their occupants focus undisturbed. He could go an entire day without interacting with anyone, and hardly notice. Here, at Hogwarts, on the other hand…

“What idiots,” Severus said dryly.

“Some of those idiots are waving to you.”

“How do you know it’s not you they’re waving at?”
“Oh, sure. Clearly Slytherin underclassmen are waving to the a Ravenclaw transfer student. I keep forgetting how well-known and popular I am.”

Severus rolled his eyes, but squinted down the stairs. “Oh,” he said, rather vaguely, not seeming to notice how his hands moved to straighten his robes. “It’s Black.”

Harry started, looking again, but he didn’t see Sirius or any of the Marauders in the crowd below them. He figured Severus must mean a different Black—one of the cousins, or maybe even Sirius’s younger brother.

“Well, go on, then,” Harry drawled. “Don’t let me keep you from your fans.”

As predicted, Severus scowled. “Are you waiting for someone?”

“Nah. Just for the crowd to clear. Don’t fancy trying to get through that mess.”

He really didn’t. It was bad enough just feeling all this magic at a distance. Joining the crowd? The evening was going to end in a migraine, one way or another.

“Tomorrow, then,” Severus said, turning back to the stairs. “Give me the scroll at breakfast, and meet me after class in the library. You are going to tell me everything.”

“You wish,” Harry called after him, but it was lost under the din.

He sighed and closed his eyes again. He knew everyone here, he reminded himself. If he wanted to, he could sort out and identify most of the major magics within the castle walls. He didn’t have time to untangle the knots of it now, but there was no point letting it overwhelm him, either. He just had to keep his grip for a few hours.

One afternoon early that summer, Harry had thought to look up the sensing of magic in the heavy index of *The Encyclopedia of Magical Maladies and Conditions*. It had a name—*magemetry*—and was apparently a side effect of several highly dangerous blood curses. That didn’t seem to be what Harry was experiencing, not when it had been so specifically triggered by his time travel, but it had been disturbing to read about nonetheless. Anyone who went to the lengths of setting a blood curse was not trying to hold back from inflicting insanity and tremendous pain on their victims, after all.

The lightest case in the encyclopedia had for a time managed the victim in what was essentially imprisonment within a specially warded ‘magical dead zone’ called the Null Room at St Mungo’s. It had ended quite abruptly, when an uninformed orderly had brought their dinner in on a recently repaired tray, the magical residue enough to drive the patient out of control of their body and soon to death. The only positive to reading that story, Harry thought, was that his condition wasn’t nearly so bad that the traces of *reparo* would push him over the edge. On the other hand, it had also led to sleepless nights as he lay awake finding bursts of magic throughout the mostly muggle city, wondering when he, too, would be found out and locked up in a small white room, never to leave again. After that, he learned to read his notes until he could not stay awake any longer. If he was going to be kept awake worrying about something, it was going to be something productive.

Heaving another sigh, Harry opened his eyes again, but waited a bit longer before going down the stairs, until the students who had gathered in the foyer had mostly moved on to the Great Hall and only the last stragglers were still coming inside. But eventually he saw McGonagall hurrying out again, and heard her call for the rest of them to move inside so they could close the doors. It was tradition to gather the new students outside so they would get the full affect of their first entrance into the Hall.
Before he went down, he pulled out a tiny vial of a bright blue liquid, swirled it around a few times until it started to glow, uncorked it, and downed the whole dose. It felt cool going down his throat, and he shuddered, not unpleasantly. He'd managed to brew several doses of calming draught in the kitchen of his flat, despite Hani fretting the whole time that he might burn the place down and the ironically stressful instructions to brewing it. Equally ironic was that it was thanks to Severus he had managed it at all. The 'outstanding' OWL he had earned wasn't thanks to any natural ability, or the teachings of Professor Slughorn or Professor Snape, but Severus's whirlwind tutoring during their detention with the weekend before the exam. And in the detentions that had followed, the boy had kept up his exacting standards, making Harry play a more active part in the brewing than he had when they'd worked for Slughorn over the holidays. If only the Potions Master Harry had known in the nineties had been half so effective a teacher, he might have learned to enjoy the class, back when he was a first year hopeful that it was an area he, unfamiliar with magic, might not be entirely behind in.

Harry tucked the vial away and started down the steps. Unlike the draught Slughorn had given himself the year before, this one was properly dosed, so he could feel the magic coursing through his veins and his mood relaxing into calmness without going loopy. It wasn't a headache potion, but it took the edge off—if not by actually dulling his sense of magic then by making him forget his sense of anxiety.

Satisfied that he wasn't going to panic and make a fool of himself, he wove his way between the groups still dawdling outside to chat. None of them called out to him, though there was a pair of Hufflepuff boys, Hands clasped tightly, who waved when he went by. They had been in the OWL revision group, but he always got their names (Floyd and Kirke) mixed up, so he just waved back and hurried on.

And he almost made it to the doors without incident. Almost. Then four bodies seemed to materialize out of the air in front of him (impossible; you can't apparate within Hogwarts, Harry) and he had to jump back to avoid colliding with them.

"Alright, Harrigan?" asked James, turning around to look down at him. Harry's breath caught in his throat, slightly, because even if his father was a prat this was his father talking to him. James, like Severus, had grown over the summer, though Severus was definitely taller. His hair had gotten longer, too, though it did nothing to make it any neater, and he was demonstrating that he was still afflicted with the habit of ruffling it when he noticed anyone looking. The only other difference, noticeable from as close as Harry had gotten to them, was a thin white scar, stark against his tanned cheek. Severus's contribution to the fight from the year before. He probably thought it 'rugged'.

Harry let out a snort of laughter at the thought, though he narrowed his eyes at the reminder of their conflict.

"Potter," he greeted instead, as evenly as he could, nodding to James, and the three behind him. "Black. Lupin. Pettigrew."

He didn't even go for his wand. Though, really, not raising a wand against his dad, godfather, and once favorite teacher shouldn't count as an achievement. Pettigrew... well. He technically hadn't done anything, yet.

"Oh, good, he knows our names," said Sirius, crossing his arms over his chest. Remus elbowed him sharply. James, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice.

"Professor Dumbledore was right, you know," he said, looking intently down at Harry. His eyes were hazel. Strange, how in Harry's attempts to disguise his most notable features he'd just ended up turning his eyes to look like his dad's instead of his mum's.
"I've heard he often is."

James ignored Harry's sarcasm, too. He must have had lots of practice.

"There are real conflicts going on, out there. It's no time for silly rivalries. I've heard people say you're a decent bloke. Can we put last year behind us?"

Harry stared at the offered hand blankly. It seemed somehow wrong to accept it, and not just because doing so might change the future and erase his existence. What was it? Oh, right.

"You attacked another student, tried to accuse me of attacking you for coming to his defense, and then spent the last weeks of the term spreading nasty rumors about Severus and I, because you could. And... you want me to just... forget about that?"

Sirius looked like he was going to repeat a few of the rumors, but Remus grabbed his arm again, clenching his teeth.

"Like I said," James went on, oblivious. "It was last year, and we should amend our behavior and move on. We're all going to be adults this year."

In the technical sense, yes, but Harry had yet to see proof of it. "So... you're not going to go after Snape this year, then?" he asked incredulously. "You're not going to fling hexes at anyone who happens to be wearing green instead of red?"

"Let bygones be bygones, and all that," James said. He was beginning to sound uncertain, his outstretched hand sinking, but it remained awkwardly in the space between them.

"Right," said Harry. "And the rest of you? I mean... you going to get bored again, Black? Or... Lupin, you going to forget your prefect badge has a responsibility attached? Pettigrew... yeah, whatever."

Remus looked rather surprised at having been mentioned.

"Leave me out of this," Sirius said, glaring at Harry. "This is between James and you. Nothing to do with me."

Harry sighed. If he knew his godfather at all, it would have plenty to do with Sirius, because he never let go of a grudge. Which was a problem, because it was that sort of rooted idea that could screw up his chances of returning to the future. Though, maybe Sirius had so many grudges it wouldn’t change anything.

“I’m not exactly out for revenge, if that’s what you think,” he said, looking back to James. “Actually… I’d rather never have to talk to you again. I mean, since you’re the sort of person who hexes people when they’re down.”

“Fine,” said James, frowning. He looked down at his hand for a moment, then let it fall. It struck Harry that he wasn’t used to this sort of rejection, and the situation was not unlike (dare Harry think it without ruining the mood by laughing) when Harry had spoken to Draco Malfoy on this very spot, all those years ago.

“Well,” James went on, after a long moment. “As long as there’s no... left-over anger. You cast a mean shield charm; I’d hate to see what you’re like using hexes.”

“I don’t,” Harry said. “I don’t need to.”
“Potter!”

Harry and James both turned at the shout, finding Lily standing in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest. James brightened immediately, his usual cocky smile returning, his hand jumping to push his hair back. “Alright, Evans?” he greeted.

“What are you doing?”

“Just making things up with Harrigan, here. You know. After last year’s misunderstanding.”

“There was no ‘misunderstanding’,” Harry muttered, and made his way around the group, arcing left past Remus, rather that between Sirius and Pettigrew, towards the Great Hall. “But, hell. Whatever. Message received, Potter. Leave Snape alone.”

Lily gave him a strange look. “Snape?” she asked.

Maybe she hadn’t heard that Harry had stepped in after she left, or noticed Harry and Severus in the library together. From how Severus told it, not only had she failed to accept his apology, she had cut him off entirely. They’d been something like friends, before, but Harry had watched her enough to know she was stubborn. He doubted she even let anyone talk about the incident around her.

But before Harry could say anything, James was speaking again. “See Evans?” he said. “Just making amends. Come sit with us.”

Harry used her automatic retort as cover to get away and slipped into the hall. Even after a year, he had to remind himself to turn towards the Ravenclaw table, not Gryffindor’s.

He found Hector and Pandora seated near the close end—or, rather, they found him, and waved so broadly it would have been rude not to squeeze into the open seat across from the pair. As he sat down, the great doors shuddered closed, and echo jolting through the hall. Something in Harry’s stomach squirmed. He wished that the students on either side of him would budge up—even the calming draught couldn’t cover the discomfort of the literal brush of magic pushing up against his shoulders.

“Harry,” Pandora said loudly, to conquer the noise, flashing a charming shoulder that Harry automatically mirrored, even with his discomfort. “You just have to tell us everything about Oxford.”

“Everything, really?” Harry forced himself to laugh, so it didn’t sound rude. “Why does everyone want to know ‘everything’?”

“It’s the Oxford Library, mate. Any decent Ravenclaw would give up their gold to go into research at the OMRL,” Hector said. He was studying Harry intently. If Harry had more energy, he might have felt self-conscious, under the scrutiny. “I don’t think you left the library at all, though,” the boy said after a moment. “You spent it all buried in your books, didn’t you?”

Harry wasn’t, apparently, too tired to feel a pang of guilt.

~

It was a Wednesday, the Wednesday of the third week of summer, that Hector had turned up at Oxford.
By then, Harry had fallen hard into the habits Hani would spend the summer fretting over. He was halfway through his first translation, not yet aware that he could be paid for that sort of thing, and living off of Hani’s unexpected brilliance making feasts out of rice, beans, eggs, or pasta, chugging glasses of water with his breakfast and dinner in hopes that it would be enough to get him through the day without having to leave the collection for a drink. When Hector found him, he had ink smudged on his face from carelessly rubbing his eyes, and the sleeve of his sweatshirt had a line of notes pressed into it.

Harry had gaped, wondering if he was going mad, but Hector had taken one look at Harry, shook his head, and plucked the quill out of his hands. “Come on, Harry,” he said firmly, ignoring the library’s rule of silence. “We’re going for lunch.”

Five minutes later they were squeezing into a table at Queen’s Lane Coffee House, a girl with a shaggy haircut tapping her toe impatiently as she waited for their drinks order. Harry looked blankly at her, and then at the menu, and somehow managed to get out—“Black coffee, thanks.”

“How’s it going, then?” Hector asked, looking up over his menu and finding Harry looking around the muggle shop curiously.

“Oh, just the coffee, for me.”

“Harry.” Hector set the menu on the table. “I didn’t drag you out of the library just to charge you up on caffeine. You’re a real, living, human being. You need sustenance.”

Harry shrugged, scuffing his feet on the floor. “Hani—er, that’s… I’ve been packing a lunch. You know, to save money. I’ve only got a few pounds with me.”

“My treat, then,” Hector said, briskly. “I think I’ll get fish and chips—they never have that at school, and I don’t think they serve it at the Leaky or the Three B’s.”

Harry glanced down at the menu again, fully intending to find whatever was cheapest to order, but then the waitress came back, setting the coffee down on the table hard enough that it splashed over the sides of the ceramic mugs. She didn’t seem to notice. “Anything else?”

“Just this, thanks,” Harry said quickly.

“Fish and chips for both of us,” Hector said. “And maybe some extra mushy peas on his plate, if you don’t mind.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Two fish an’ chips,” she muttered blandly, grabbing the menus off the table. She turned away again before Harry could protest, and was flagged down by a man with horribly high-waisted trousers, a shirt with both stripes and polka dots, and a chevron mustache. Harry was so busy staring at the ridiculousness of the getup he nearly forgot what he was doing.

“I’ll pay you back,” he told Hector, forcing himself to look away. He’d seen stranger outfits from wizards trying to blend in with muggles, but there was no greater reminder that he was stuck in the seventies than people on the cutting edge of bad fashion. “What are you doing here, anyways?”

“I’ve come to make sure you aren’t drowning yourself in books again, and, since you have been, remind you that there’s more to the world that research. Like food, yum.” Hector said cheerfully.

Harry gaped for a moment. That was Hector, alright; Hector who had dragged Harry to the Great
Hall for breakfasts and lunches every morning he could. Coming all the way to Oxford seemed a little extreme, though. “I mean… how did you even get into the library? And find me? It’s a restricted access area…”

“Haven’t I told you about my dad before? He and mum actually met here—at Oxford, I mean. Anyways, he does medical research at the library sometimes. Less now than he used to, but he had some things he needed to do here today, and since your letters have been troubling, I convinced him to bring me along. As for locating you—well, I just had to ask a few of the librarians where the kid from Hogwarts’ carrel was, and they pointed me your way.”

“Oh,” said Harry.

He took a sip of coffee, and winced at how bitter it was. Hani refused to make him coffee. She’d found an herbal tea that was very relaxing—she’d probably found it at an apothecary, because it was one of the few things that helped him relax when the magic got to be too much for him. Whenever he tried to convince her to buy coffee she’d come back with more of it, so Harry had given up. But now, he’d been taken away from his books, and was afraid that he was going to fall asleep halfway through the meal if he didn’t get himself caffeinated. He took another sip.

“Yeah, dad’s back at trying to get me to go follow him into research,” Hector went on easily. “He’s been taking me with him to the office. I usually only go because it’s better than sitting around at home. The house is just too quiet in the summer, you know? And who would give up a chance to visit Oxford?”

“This isn’t the library,” Harry pointed out, gesturing to the muggles crammed into the cafe.

“I mean, I don’t actually have permission to take anything off the shelves.” Hector sipped enough off his coffee to make room for cream, and stirred the liquids together idly. “And I’d rather catch up with you than wander around looking at the spines of books I’m not allowed to read.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“You should think. I saw that stack you had at your desk. You’re falling back into the Ravenclaw curse, aren’t you—this is summer, Harry! They give us time to let our brains rest for a reason, and here you are, jamming yours full with—whatever it is you said you were working on. Translation? Your letters are extremely vague.”

“Translation, yes… But do you really think if you were in my shoes you wouldn’t be doing the same?”

“I’d at least remember to eat. And sleep.”

Hector was looking at Harry so squarely it was making him uncomfortable. Usually when people looked at Harry, their eyes always drifted to the scar, but that was hidden up in a line beneath his fringe and a heavy dose of freckles, and here it didn’t mean anything the way it did in the nineties, anyways. No, Hector was looking at him—really looking—and it made Harry feel terribly self-conscious.

“You look like shit,” Hector declared after a minute. “I don’t think the dark circles under your eyes are from ink, but the smudge on your nose is. You haven’t shaved recently, either, have you?”

Harry scratched his chin. It scratched back, stubby hairs in odd patches here and there. It was, luckily, fairly light while his hair was ginger, but apparently bad enough to notice. “Can’t do the… the way we do at school, here, and I used the last of my, um, shaving cream, a few days ago.” By
that he meant the potion he’d been using to keep it in check. He’d only had one vial of it, extra which Slughorn had let them keep after that class, and he wasn’t quite desperate enough to write to Severus about it, yet. He hadn’t had time to be.

“Well, there’s got to be a Boots around here. Or a Tesco? How are you going to have a summer romance with that peach fuzz?”

“Summer romance…?” Harry echoed, confused. “What are you on about?”

“Or adventure, if you’d like. You can’t go on an adventure looking like that.”

“I’m not trying to go on adventure. I’m trying to get as much research done as quickly as I can.”

“Yes, I can see that, and declare that you are wasting your young years.” Hector smiled, and Harry couldn’t help but feel like there was some joke he was missing. “So? Is there a Tesco?”

Harry thought about it. He thought he’d seen one, but he couldn’t remember where. “I mean, probably…”

“Good grief, you haven’t even explored enough to find where to buy crisps? No wonder you’re so skinny. Well, we’ll ask the waitress.”

“I don’t think I like crisps,” said Harry. He’d never tried them, himself, but whenever Dudley had any he made a huge mess, just so Harry would have to clean it up. “They’re so…”

Oily, he was going to say, but then the waitress showed up with their fish and chips, which were literally glistening with oil. His stomach rumbled. Harry was glad for the noise in the room; he was grateful for the food, especially since he’d been living off of eggs every morning and rice and beans every evening, but didn’t need to give Hector any evidence that he was right.

“You’re pretty comfortable here, aren’t you?” Hector said after a few minutes, watching Harry whack the bottom of a glass bottle of brown sauce to try and get some out onto his chips. “My dad—even with mum, and working here for years, where everyone’s all mixed up, he still tries to hard, makes a fool of himself. But you seem fine.”

“Er, I guess. I grew up…” He glanced around, searching for a muggle-safe word, and winced when the only one he could think of was one of the Dursleys’ favorites. Not for him, mind, but for them and those they deemed acceptable. “Normal. With my Aunt and Uncle who were… entirely ordinary.”

“Makes sense, with a name like Harrigan.” Hector paused for a moment to finish the chunk of fish he’d had. “And they don’t mind you staying down here on your own all summer?”

Harry hesitated. He’d avoided discussing his past with anyone; after all, the best way to avoid getting caught lying was to avoid lying at all. He could drop it all with a quick ‘no’, but that seemed rude. “They were mixed up in the… accident. The one that put… my teacher in the hospital. It was too much for them to handle, being, um. Normal.”

“They’re—oh. God, Harry, I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to…”

“They’re not dead,” Harry said quickly. “Just…” He glanced around, and took advantage of a roar of laughter coming from one of the other tables to lower his voice a bit and speak freely. “Some really strong memory charms. They don’t even remember they had a nephew. Last I heard they were moving to New York.”
For some reason, it felt less cruel to lie directly than let a misconception slide.

“Oh,” said Hector. “So—that’s good. You could check up on them, make sure they’re alright. Heck, you might run into them on the street, someday.”

“God, I hope not.” Harry laughed darkly, looking down at his hands. “They’re… extraordinarily horrible people, Hector. If I could go my whole life without ever seeing them again, I’d be happy as… anything.”

(And all the worse, Harry thought, was that he had a taste of freedom and self-sufficiency now, and no, he wasn’t great at it, but it was all him. His choices. And when he went back… Dumbledore always insisted Harry returned to the Dursleys.)

He looked up and found Hector staring at him again, wide-eyed, and forced himself to crack a smile. “Sorry. Let’s talk about something else, yeah? Talking about them always brings out the worst in me.” He picked up another chip, as though he could just pop it in and overcome his own glum mood.

“Harry,” Hector began, his voice low, hands resting on the table as though carrying on eating would be too much of a distraction. Harry felt his own hands still, and the stench of fried potato wafting from inches in front of his face was suddenly overwhelming. He quickly set the chip down, wishing he had a glass of pumpkin juice to clear the foul taste rising in his throat. Hector didn’t seem to notice, even though he was staring, and after a moment finished, “Is the accident the reason you do this to yourself?”

Harry thought about how to answer that for a moment, though half-heartedly. There was no way he could make Hector understand why he was so desperate, not without the whole time travel thing coming to light, and so he considered his coffee instead, wondering whether the bitter acidity would help clear the taste in his mouth. Another group came in through the door, and they were witches, clearly, and the new magic was the last thing he needed mixing with that smell, and he gave up trying to think of a clever way out of this at all.

“I’m not really sure what you mean,” he said, and if the long pause wasn’t enough to convey his insincerity, then the lack of intonation was. He didn’t look up, picking up the slice of lemon that came with his fish instead and licking it experimentally—okay, ow, bad idea. Maybe he had better just stick to the mushy peas.

“Say I’m mothering if you’d like, but you’re clearly not sleeping enough, and I have severe doubts about whether you’re eating at all. You barely respond to letters, and—do you know any of the librarians, even?”

“Of course I do. There’s Yasmin Shirazi, for one.”

“She’s your supervisor, right? You wrote about her. She doesn’t count. What I mean is, have you talked to anyone you haven’t had to?”

“Hani.”

“Hani?” Hector echoed. He looked pained. “Harry, she’s… that’s… the help you brought from the school, right? Harry, that’s… not what I meant.”

“Why not? They’re remarkably clever, you know. Especially Hani.” Suddenly thinking of S.P.E.W. and how proud Hermione would be Harry took a sip of his coffee to hide his smile, he was surprised to find it was almost cold. He was so used to the tea Hani made, with the little elf-charms to keep it hot. “Everyone always underestimates them. I don’t see why talking to her should count for any
Hector sighed, letting his head drop. “You and Pandora, I swear… Look, Harry. If nothing else, you should talk to the librarians. I bet they’d be interested in hearing about your research. And that you could learn a thing or two from their experiences.”

“I have talked to the librarians—”

“I mean about healthy research habits,” Hector stressed. “You’re on a collision course with burnout, and, more than likely, with a trip to St Mungo’s.”

Harry didn’t respond right away, and Hector sighed. Over Hector’s shoulder, Harry saw the man in the awful get-up leaving with his group, the table filling quickly with three women arguing loudly in French. The waitress was giving them a pinched look as she passed around menus, and when she looked up, happened to make brief eye-contact with Harry. He hurriedly put down his head and grabbed his fork, stabbing it into the peas.

“I’m not going to end up in St Mungo’s,” he said firmly before shoving the green glob into his mouth. He didn’t have time for a detour in the hospital.

“No? Cause I’ve seen people overworking themselves like you do, Harry. Every few years, there’s a fifth or seventh year the professors don’t catch fast enough, and does serious damage by not taking good enough care of their bodies. *Magical* damage, Harry. This is the sort of thing my dad researches. It is very possible to damage the connections between your physical body and your magic, you know that? And incredibly difficult to cure. Trust me—dad brings home all the horror stories.”

Harry’s eyes flicked about nervously, but none of the muggles seemed to notice them. If he strained his ears, he could hear the witches in the room discussing rugby scores—cover-up for quidditch, perhaps—but Hector seemed unreserved in his speech.

“I’ll say your mothering,” he said. “Honestly, Hector. I’m not an idiot. And I’ve got Hani with me, and do you really think she’d let me get sick? She’d iron her ears, after she shoved food down my throat and charmed my to the bed.”

“I don’t know her. But I know you, and—”

“Hector,” Harry said firmly. “If I do end up in the hospital, you can come and say ‘I told you so’, but I’m not going to. I’m fine.”

From the way Hector was looking at Harry now from across the table in the Great Hall, he did not think Harry had been ‘fine’. And Harry wasn’t about to tout ‘I’m didn’t end up in St Mungo’s’ as a victory, especially when the mention of the OMRL had the girl sitting to his left unsubtly listening in.

“I’ll tell you about it later, Pandora,” he said. “Otherwise I’ll have to get up on the table and shout it to avoid eavesdropping turning into ridiculous rumors.”

The boy seated next to Pandora blushed and started up a conversation with his other neighbor about vampires and inferi. Ravenclaws always had topics like that to fall back to.
“How about you?” Harry asked, satisfied their conversation was once again mostly their own. “I haven’t heard from either of you in a few weeks.”

The pair exchanged glances. “You’ve not been reading the papers at all, have you,” Hector said.

“Of course he hasn’t,” Pandora replied. “He’s already buried in the past; why would he read the papers? Except for ones from the older archives, of course.”

“Has something happened?”

But before they could voice a response, the doors were opening again, and everyone around them turning in their seats to get a good look at the new first years. Harry winced. He had forgotten how out of control their magics were.

“We’ll talk about it upstairs,” Pandora said, so quietly Harry nearly missed it. He was surprised to find the serious expression on her face; he was so used to thinking of her like Luna, with that sort of strange floatiness about her, though they really were two very different people, looks aside. “It’s not something we should speak of at the dinner table.”

“Alright,” said Harry, puzzled but without the brain power to put to the matter. He was really beginning to wish he’d ignored Hani and stayed upstairs. *First years.*

Over the course of the sorting, Harry tried to untangle the mass of them. It wasn’t unlike decoding, the way he had to think about it: identify each individual one at a time, and keep their unique magic clear in his mind while he tried to move to the next. It was easier when they started to split up among the four tables—Harry clapped in time with everyone else, not really paying attention to anything outside the magic—but they were so… unrestrained, their magic reaching out for everyone around them to get tangled up in. Harry kept his breathing calm and even, but between the first years and the candles floating underneath the ancient charms work on the ceiling and the house elves scurrying about below and the people next to them whose shoulders kept knocking into his, Harry was fighting the urge to cast *protego* as powerfully as he could just to keep it all away for a minute.

There was a thought… *protego* was a shield charm against magic; would it work to cut off his sense of it? Then again, he couldn’t exactly run around casting shield charms without anyone noticing…

When Dumbledore stood up to address them again, Harry lost the thought. He bit down hard on his cheek, knowing what magic was coming…

“Not hungry, Harry?” Pandora asked.

Harry blinked. Then blinked again, and finally had to hold back a sigh, and shook his head, as though that could clear the feeling like his brain had been replaced with a bag of wet sand—the calming draught hard at work running like ice in his veins, the magic straining to hold back his moment of panic. Yes, the food had arrived, and now that he noticed it, the smells attacked his nose with an intensity that made him dizzy in a new way.

“Just thinking,” he said, and forced himself to grab for a bowl of mashed potatoes, trying not to puke at all the colors and smells laid out before him. Better not give Hector anything else to worry about.

“Wonder if the new Defense professor is any good,” Hector said, already halfway through a slice of ham. “Did I hear Professor Dumbledore say he was a Burke?”

“Yes,” said the girl on Hector’s other side. She was a fifth year, if Harry remembered correctly, with a drastically short haircut and square glasses. She didn’t look particularly hopeful. “I thought we might have a teacher last more than one year, for once. Professor Finch was actually competent. I
mean, old names are nice and all, but… remember Professor Selwyn?”

Everyone around them balked.

“What happened to Professor Selwyn?” Harry asked.

“Lit himself on fire atop the astronomy tower,” Hector answered glumly. “He’d been having an affair with the old muggle studies professor, and when it got out he found it shameful enough for self-immolation.”

“He was off his rocker the whole year, though,” the girl said. “Once he locked us in the classroom with curses on all the exits. We were *supposed* to break them to get out, but we hadn’t covered curse breaking at all. Janet Goldstein ended up in the hospital wing.”

“How did you get out?”

“We didn’t,” said the boy on her other side. “We had to wait until the teachers broke through from the other side. It was an exciting lesson, though. Very practical.”

Harry squinted at the boy. He seemed… familiar, somehow, though with sandy blond hair and brown eyes he wasn’t particularly extraordinary.

“Practical,” the boy next to Harry snorted. “You’re ridiculous, Barty. You just liked watching the Hufflepuffs getting blasted for trying the same approach ten times.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up before he could stop them—was it *that* Barty? As in, Barty Crouch Jr? Who had posed as Mad-Eye Moody for a year, put Harry’s name in the Goblet of Fire, turned the Triwizard Cup into a portkey, gotten Cedric killed, and sent Harry to die when Voldemort used him to come back from the dead? Yes, now that he saw it, Harry was certain…

“Sure,” said Crouch, grinning. “They were easy enough to convince to keep trying unlocking spells. And eventually the curse would have worn down enough for a ‘finite’ to disarm. It wasn’t like I knew how strong he had cast it.”

“Whatever,” said the pixie girl. “*He* was crazy, but Finch was a decent teacher. We actually followed the syllabus. We actually *had* a syllabus.”

“But she wasn’t fun,” Crouch complained. “No imagination at all. How were we supposed to learn anything if she just lectured exactly what we’d read in the book? I bet the ‘unfortunate circumstances’ Dumbledore mentioned were that she lost her pocket book and just about died from the disorganization.”

“Or maybe she’s a secret agent,” the girl across from Crouch cut in. “You know, like an undercover auror? And someone blew her cover?”

“That’s just impractical,” said Hector. “If someone blew her cover, that would mean we’d have heard about it, which we haven’t, or you wouldn’t be hypothesizing. Besides, why would anyone be undercover at Hogwarts?”

“My father says that they’ve been enlisting more aurors, since there’s been all this trouble going on,” Crouch said, breezily, as though he couldn’t care less what his father said. “He wouldn’t say exactly what they’ve been doing. They could be putting undercover agents everywhere, to try and figure out what’s going on.”

“Well, they aren’t doing their jobs very well, then,” the pixie said. “And Professor Finch was
competent, if anything. She probably just had some sort of family emergency.”

“You’re no fun at all, Wensley,” the second boy complained. “No, it’s got to be more exciting than that. Maybe she eloped.”

“Eloped? That’s ridiculous. She wouldn’t give up her career for something as stupid as love. Maybe she got a better job. I bet she’d make a good curse breaker—”

“That requires a sense of adventure, and she didn’t have an ounce of that. Maybe she’s got a ministry position—?”

And on it went.

Eventually, Hector thought to give Harry introductions. The pixie girl was Lenora Wensley (not Weasley, she added pointedly), and the secret agent conspiracist was her roommate Tash Stratton. The other boy was Cooper Prewitt, who Harry was fairly certain was Molly Weasley’s youngest brother. Together with Crouch, they were a rather strange bunch. They didn’t seem to get along at all, with all the arguing they did, but Hector said he tutored the four of them together, and they certainly had a practiced familiarity to their banter. And when Hector insisted that Prewitt was an idiot for thinking Finch could possibly be in training to become an astronaut, even Wensley jumped to his defense, tearing apart Hector’s argument with twisted logic that should have been easier to argue against than it was. But Harry, learning that the sandy-haired boy was definitely Crouch, retreated from the conversation. Sure, he would like to interfere with Crouch’s life, if that the fiasco that was the Third Task could be changed, but who knew what else would be changed along with it.

Finally Dumbledore stood to give them his closing remarks. It was an uninspiring speech, all overcoming differences and embracing unity, but perhaps that was Harry’s lingering irritation speaking.

He was eager to jump out of his seat put at least a few walls between himself and the first years. They hurried to the tower, and Harry, Pandora, and Hector all gathered in the boys’ room, sitting on the floor and sampling a grab-bag of snacks Hector’s grandmother had sent him from New Delhi, and while Hector dug in his trunk looking for something Harry told Pandora about the library.

“It was amazing, really, to think about all those books collected in one place. It was practically a cathedral—a huge, open room, and several additional levels ringing around the walls going up, with offices and special collections. I had a carrel on the third floor, all to myself, sort of out of the way, but I could walk over and look down on the shelves... did you know they arrange them in specific designs? Looks like a celtic knot, to me. Apparently it’s an old library tradition. The shelves here are arranged that way, too, except you can’t look down on it to see them. It’s why the layout is so strange.”

“Dad says it was to deter thieves,” said Hector. “They’d be charmed to close the gaps when something was taken off the shelves without the proper access, so they’d have to follow a single path back to the entrance, like a maze, and usually someone would notice and stop them by then.”

“Well, I got lost more times than I can count, the first few weeks,” Harry went on. “They’d give a whole galleon to anyone who’d shelve a cart of books, and I wondered why the pay was so high until I tried it. Had to talk one of the librarians into charming the cart for directions, since I couldn’t myself.”

“Why don’t they have the elves shelve the books?” Hector asked, glancing towards Pandora. “It seems like for such an extensive collection, it would be a waste of labor costs, for humans to do it.”
Harry frowned. “I dunno,” he said. “Elves are mostly kept out of libraries, though. They don’t even clean the one here, usually. Something about disrupting the magic?”

Pandora tilted her head. “Elves’ magic doesn’t interact with wizarding wards, unless they are specified.”

Harry shrugged, rubbing his eyes. “Well, we could just ask, I suppose… Hani?”

The two other Ravenclaws startled back when the elf appeared in the middle of the room. She seemed just as surprised, spotting Hector, but turned her attention quickly to Harry. “Is Master Harry needing something?”

Harry shifted, brushing off the feeling of her apparition. “We were wondering about elves and libraries,” he said. “They don’t use house elves to mind the Library at Oxford either, do they? Is there a reason? Can you tell us?”

Hani gave a slow nod, and turned to address the other two, but at the sight of Pandora, she froze. “Mistress Pandora?”

“Hani?” The girl laughed, but looked at Harry in confusion. “What are you doing here?”

“Hani is being an elf of the castle, now, Mistress,” Hani said dutifully.

“You two… know each other?” Harry asked.

“Don’t you know?” Hector cut in. “Pandora knows half the elves in Britain, I swear.”

“That’s not even close to being true,” Pandora said. “But I do know more than most people, I suppose. After all, I was raised by them.”

Harry stared. “You were raised… by the elves.”

“Mistress Pandora is being raised by Dippy, who is being an elf of the Moone family, after Mistress Moone passed,” Hani said. “Dippy is being a very social elf, and soon all the elves is knowing Mistress Pandora.”

“Father didn’t have the know-how to raise a child on his own,” Pandora explained. “And I never knew my mother. Many children have elf nannies, but I was… Well, for years I was convinced I was an elf, I spent so much time among them. It made my relatives on the Fawley side angry, but father never cared for them, and… I think he thought it was funny.”

“That’s…” Harry didn’t know whether to say ‘bizarre’ or ‘sad’, and decided that both would probably come off as insulting.

Hector, apparently, had no such qualms, and he looked up from his trunk again, grinning. “Ridiculous, right? She’s practically a fae. Changeling child.”

“Changeling child?” Harry asked.

Pandora shot Hector a wry look, but answered. “The fae will sometimes steal human babies, leaving a fae in their place. It’s been theorized that humans only have magic because of changelings. They grow up and have children with humans, and through them magic gets passed down.”

"Young Master shouldn’t be saying such things," Hani said. "Mistress Pandora is a very human witch, not a fae. ‘tis a hard life, for them that are of mixed blood. The young Master should know
Harry sighed. Hani was just as strong-minded as Hector, he knew, and he wouldn't dare leave them in a room alone together, let alone if they were going to start talking blood status and creature rights. "Well, I mean, that's pretty cool, I think," he said. "To be raised by elves and all. I didn't even know what an elf was until I was twelve."

"Oh, right," said Hector. "Did you ever tell your Aunt and Uncle about it? Muggles don't really go for the whole forced labor thing, these days. Mum about threw a fit when Dad explained to her about them."

Harry tried to imagine what would have happened if he told the Dursley's about house elves. After all, Dobby had been in their house, and used magic to drop a cake on one of their guest's heads. But then again, maybe they would have liked the opportunity that arose. They had treated him like a house elf for years, after all, but he didn't have their particular brand of sycophantic magic...

"The Library, Hani?" he asked, seeing as Hani was bristling at the suggestion that her labor was in any way forced. It was, after all, incredibly disrespectful to suggest an elf was anything but devoted to their work, even if Harry was rather put off by the whole magical slavery aspect to it.

"House elves is not being welcome in libraries, Master Harry," Hani said. "Many books are having spells to keep us from touching. If an elf is not knowing what she is doing, she might be ending up cursed very easily."

"What?" Harry said, and sat up alarmed. "But—you've helped me in the library, loads of times. Have I been putting you in danger?"

"Master Harry is being ridiculous," Hani said, which was as good as an insult as Harry would ever hear from her. "Hani has been working in libraries for years. Hani is knowing not to go touching books with elf wards."

Harry leaned back again, resting his head against his bed. "But why?" he asked. "Why would anyone be cursing books against elves?"

Hani did not answer, so Pandora did. "It's how humans can keep hold on them," she said. There was a certain edge to her voice, one which Harry had not heard before, and her shoulders were a little stiffer. "Why do you think we don't allow goblins wands, or to attend Hogwarts? Wizards like to think if they keep their knowledge secret, it makes them special. Superior."

"Mistress Pandora is being harsh," said Hani, but she said it softly, and her ears were drooping. "And wizards is not needing to curse their books. Elves is not wanting to steal their secrets, only to be serving."

"But elves don't need any of our books," Harry said, puzzled. "I mean, you've got your own magic, right? Would our—I mean, would books for humans spellcasters even be useful for elves?"

"No," said Hani firmly. "Elves is not needing them. Elves is not reading human things."

Harry decided not to mention that Hani had read human books for him, because he was beginning to understand why she had been so secretive about it to begin with.

"Well, it's ridiculous that they keep elves out of the library," Pandora proclaimed. "I imagine a good number of you would be very happy there… but what about around the college? I know a few elves up there, I think. Mousey? Filbert? Moggy? Are they still at Oxford?"
“Mousey is being well, Mistress,” Hani said, relieved to be off the topic of elf restrictions. “Filbert is not being in the college anymore, but Mousey is. She is becoming an old elf, but is still carrying tea. And Moggy is being well, too.”

“Excellent,” Pandora said with a smile. “I’m afraid I hardly see anyone these days, since Dippy can’t carry me about as easily as she used to.”

“Mistress Pandora is still spoken of among the elves. We is hearing all about your summers, and the foods you is asking Dippy to cook.”

Pandora laughed. “She still refuses to let me into the kitchen.”

“Mistress should not be cooking ever,” Hani said firmly. “She is being too… interesting with her food. Is not the same to cook as to make potions, Mistress.”

They carried on like that for a few more minutes, and then Hani returned to the kitchens, disappearing with a bow.

“That was the elf you spent the whole summer with?” Hector said. “She seems rather… forceful.”

“She is, for things she cares about. Once she makes up her mind…” But Harry frowned. “I’m not entirely sure… I mean, she can read. She’s helped me in the library here… that’s not going to get her in trouble, is it?”

“It shouldn’t,” Pandora said. “But maybe don’t mention it. It’s taboo, to suggest an elf might be plotting against humans.” She sighed, pulling her legs out from under her body to stretch them out. “It’s in their biology, at this point, but… well, elves weren’t always bound. They were free helpers, once, a long time ago. But someone new came along, and instead of loyal friends he saw a potential enemy, and he bound the elves to humans with magic. To rebel against the humans… they would have to break a thousand-year-old piece of magic that’s tied to the very Earth.”

“That’s horrible,” said Harry. He wondered if Hermione knew about that. If she had, she’d never told him… or Harry had tuned her out, as he usually did when she started going into S.P.E.W. talk.

“They are happy. Right or wrong—well, I’d say it is wrong, but I am not an elf, and can’t be the judge of that. To them, it is no different than being bound by fate.”

They all sat in silence for a moment. Pandora made it sound like fate was just a fact of life, not worth worrying over. Harry didn’t know if ‘fate’ was what had driven his life so far, what with the mass murdering megalomaniac Dark Lord who had made Harry an orphan and tried to kill him at least five times—not to mention his current seemingly impossible time travel conundrum—but if it was… fate was a bitch.

He resolved to donate another two sickles to S.P.E.W. when he got back. But maybe he’d also have Hermione write Pandora for some much needed perspective, too.

“So… were you going to tell me what happened that made you stop writing?” he asked, yawning again.

“Oh!” said Hector, and he shook himself. “Sorry, I’m so stuffed from the feast, I’m falling asleep. Here.”

He passed over what he had retrieved from his trunk—a copy of the Daily Prophet. It was looking worse for the wear, and Harry spotted the date, 17 August, 1976, before he unfolded it. There, in the newspaper’s customary mode of printing in letters too big for their space on the page, was the
A statement released today by interim Head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes (DMAC) and former Deputy Head, Millicent Bagnold, confirms that Iganatius ‘Iggy’ Noble, 113, was found dead in his home Monday. When Noble failed to appear for his regular meetings and multiple owls returned unopened, aurors were sent on a wellness check. The scene they discovered can only be described as ‘horrific’. (For in-depth analysis of the mode of Noble’s death, see Page 5; reader discretion is advised).

As Head of the DMAC, Noble was one of the leaders of the opposition to the Use of Magic Bill (A-319) voted on Friday. It is unclear whether the failure of the bill to pass the Wizengamot was related to the murder. Noble’s death follows the series of disappearances and deaths of other legislators.

Readers may recall the attack on Alpheus Fawley, who until last year was heading the Committee for Familial Rights. He was a victim of Dark magic just before his bill, amending Muggle Visitation Rights to St Mungo’s, was due to be voted on. Since then, the bill has been in standby while Fawley was held in intensive care; his passing last Thursday is speculated by some to be foul play preemptive to the vote on the Use of Magic Bill. Despite speculations, however, there continues to be limited evidence in any of the cases surrounding these deaths or the disappearance of four other members of the Wizengamot.

“Whoever was behind this tragedy will face the full force of our judiciary system,” Bagnold announced. “Although none have stepped forward to claim responsibility for recent events, I can say with confidence that the DMAC and the DMLE will work together to see an end to this unconscionable violence. We are looking into rumors of recent organized crime, and aurors are cracking down on illegal Dark Arts practices as we speak.”

The article went on, but Harry paused, looking up. Alpheus Fawley. That was Pandora’s cousin on her mother’s side, the one who had gotten in trouble the previous holidays, when Pandora had predicted there would be a funeral. Predicted correctly, apparently.

“I’m sorry. Your cousin, he’s…”

“Gone,” she said firmly, but she looked at her hands.

“That bill the Wizengamot was voting on,” Hector cut in. “It would have made it legal for wizards to obliviate muggles themselves, broadening the definition of ‘self-defence’ in cases of magical exposure. It had a lot of support from some extremely powerful families. The papers all thought it was a shoo-in, but apparently some of the seats had been meeting behind closed doors and formed a coalition against it without anyone knowing. But Noble—it came out that he wasn’t part of the coalition, even though as head of the DMAC and so in charge of normal regulations on muggle obliviation. He voted against it, but not as part of the coalition.”

“And that’s… strange?”

“The whole bill is strange! If anyone was going to change obliviation rights, it should have been the head of the DMAC, but instead it was the DMLE and the DRCMC…”

“The what?”

“Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures,” said Pandora darkly. She clearly was not a fan.
“They argued they could propose it because magical creatures getting loose in a Muggle area could be cause for obliviation, but everyone knows it’s just because the DMLE needed an ally to get one-up on the DMAC and the Minister.”

“Er, right...” said Harry. He didn’t know much about politics or the way the Ministry worked, but it sounded like a headache, and he was too tired to work it out. “So they killed him... because the bill failed?”

“Only, no one’s really sure, are they?” Hector said. “And it was a nasty piece of work. Very... gory.”

“Father says it’s a scare tactic,” Pandora said. “He’s a Lib, you know. His cousin has the family seat, since it went to the Spencers back in the thirties, but I hear them talking, when his connections gather. His study shares a wall with the library.”

“Well, at least your dad is doing something, behind closed doors or not. Mine refuses to. He and mum have been arguing, but he won’t take up the seat—he has the right to it, you know, for the Smithe family, since the Smith-without-an-e branch won’t touch it. His family has always voted conservative; there’d be too much pressure.”

“It’s better if he stays away,” Pandora replied. “I’m glad my father doesn’t have the seat. After what happened to Alpheus, the Fawley’s have been arguing about it, since they’re split, and it’s going to end in blood.”

Harry stared at her. “Your—you think your family members are going to...?”

She gave him a calm look. “It’s an old issue. Half the Fawleys go to Hufflepuff, half to Slytherin, and they all think the other half is full of traitors to the family name. Annelise would take the seat, but she’s a Holloway now—you know Eve and Lyra? The Hufflepuffs? Well, that’s the problem, really.... Cousin Cecil’s on the outs since he’s run off with Charles Prewitt—that’s Cooper’s uncle—and his brother Russell coaches Quidditch and refuses to give that up. Antioch—he’s from the Hufflepuff side—is trying to argue that the seat should go his way, since Alpheus was the last eligible male on Great-Grandfather Hector’s branch of the family, discounting Cecil and Russ. But traditionally a witch is the head of the family, and there hasn’t been a witch in four generations on that side. And they’re all Hufflepuffs.”

“It’s a pureblood thing,” Hector said, noticing Harry’s confusion. But his own brow furrowed, and he asked, “They... they won’t push it off to you, Pan?”

“They could, but I don’t turn seventeen until December,” she said thoughtfully, as though they weren’t discussing apparent matters of life and death. “And mother may have been next in line for family head, but no one has really discussed whether it falls to me, once Grandmother passes—she’s not a Fawley by blood, which is probably why she’s held it so long. I rather doubt they will put it my way, considering. Probably Great-Aunt Addie will take it, since she’s only fifty or so, even if she’s rather... Father says she’s so Slytherin, she refuses to take the seat because it would hold her back from her real political goals.”

Harry wasn’t sure what they were considering, but he was surprised to learn that Pandora was so wrapped up in politics. They had talked about issues before, but it was always Hector who brought things up, not her. She was more interested in stories and creativity and tended to get lost in her own little world. It seemed strange to think of her being pushed into taking a seat on the Wizengamot.

“In any case,” said Hector. “Anyone who has been keeping up the news can see the writing on the wall. It’s not just the deaths.” His voice dropped, even though they were alone in the room, the door
closed. “There’s been louder voices among the conservatives, pushing for more extreme isolationism… not just from the muggles, but from the more liberal governments in France and Germany. And there’s been more incidents of muggle baiting…”

“That’s where those ‘Death Eaters’ come into play,” Pandora added, and Harry instantly sat up a little straighter. This had to be the first time he’d heard the title used. “That’s what they’re calling them, the group behind the increase in Dark Arts incidents, we think. It’s hard to tell. Father wouldn’t give me a straight answer when I asked, so we can’t really be certain it’s the same as the ones who killed Noble, but…”

“But… why?” asked Harry.

Hector was surprised. “Well, it can’t be coincidence, can it? It would be like saying the implosion of the German Ministry was unrelated to Grindelwald’s rise to power.”

“What? No, I mean—what’s their motive?”

Hector seemed even more confused. “I don’t—they’re a group of muggle-baiters, Harry. I’d say their views on the way the world should work are a little flawed.”

“Yes, but what are they going for? You said they’re pushing for isolationism from the muggles, but then turning around to go after them doesn’t feel like isolationism. It feels like… trying to create some sort of international incident with the muggle government. Except, the muggles don’t know we exist, so why?”

Hector shook his head. “Anti-muggle sentiment is nothing new. Muggle-baiting either; everyone knows it’s happening, we just don’t hear about it as much as we have recently. Especially from blood purists. It’s a sticky political issue.”

“But those purebloods have the majority of the power, don’t they?” Harry pushed. “Them being the establishment, and all. And you said the bill had their support. What I don’t get is why they would go about stirring up change. If they have power, even if they’re playing dirty, they’d want to keep what’s happening swept under the table, not go about killing people and making a statement of it.”

“‘Change’ is a rather positive way to look at what they are doing—”

“Harry’s right,” said Pandora, cutting them both off. “If those who have power already are taking such drastic steps, they have to be aiming for something even they haven’t the power to force. If they’re going as far as violence, they’re pushing for revolutionary changes.”


Hector looked perturbed. “Call it a riot, not a revolution. They haven’t exactly put out a list of demands. No one even knows what the Death Eaters are, aside from a group of violent psychos.”

Harry sighed, leaning back. He knew the Death Eaters were… psycho, to use Hector’s word, though it felt unpleasantly like something his Uncle would say. Harry probably knew the extent of their violent extremism better than anyone else currently alive, just from the stories he’d heard told, but… he was also curious.

He knew what the Death Eaters stood for by the time Voldemort fell: death to the muggles, power to the Dark Lord, free crucios for all, and all that. But how on earth had they even managed to rise in the first place? The Slytherins now, who were probably all going to grow up to be Death Eaters, hardly seemed any worse than the Slytherins from the nineties—though no one would expect, say,
Pansy Parkinson to get involved in a political war. At least not until Voldemort came back and turned everything on its head, but no one had expected that, either.

But the situation really did not make sense. Why were the purebloods pushing for further isolation from the muggles, if they were then going to turn about and want to exterminate them? Were either of those really what they wanted? Or was it just some ploy to get Voldemort in power?

And where was Voldemort? No one had even mentioned him, even when Harry overheard Severus’s ‘friends’ were speaking with their pointed vagueness.

“Let’s not talk about this anymore,” said Pandora suddenly, drawing Harry out of his thoughts. “We’re at Hogwarts now. Whatever is happening out there, we’ll only hear about it after it happens.”

Hector shrugged but took back the paper from Harry. “I’ll still be having nightmares over the description of Noble’s death. ‘Reader discretion’, my ass; they shouldn’t have printed that.”

Harry wasn’t so certain of Pandora’s declaration. After Dumbledore’s warning at the end of the previous year, he was almost certain that the political battle would be coming to the school sooner rather than later. He just hoped it wouldn’t get violent here. People yelling insults at each other in the hall, he could understand. But bringing the silent war to literal battles between the houses? He shuddered at the thought.

And then he yawned, again, as the bells struck ten o’clock. It seemed strange to worry about classes in the morning, after the conversation they’d just had, and he must have said as much, because Hector laughed.

“Well, you won’t have class until ten,” he said certainly. “Sixth years always have Arithmancy or Divination first thing on Thursdays. We all have to go down for breakfast at seven to get your schedules set up, though.”

“It’s still later than I was getting up,” Harry reasoned. “The Library opened at seven, so I was up by six five days a week. How do you know the schedule?”

“It hasn’t changed in years,” Hector said. “You’re lucky you’re not taking Care or Muggle Studies, because OWL Runes is at the same time.”

Harry frowned, wondering how Hermione had managed her schedule, once she’d gotten rid of the Time Turner, but then he caught himself and tried to dive back into the conversation, rather than risk worrying about Hermione so close to bedtime. “Are you two ready? You’re taking more classes than I am, I bet.”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Hector said cheerfully. “Actually, I talked to Cat on the train, and we’re going to keep the revisions group going, to stay on top of homework, make sure none of us fall behind. Probably we won’t get everyone, but… you’ll come, won’t you?”

Harry thought about it, and shrugged. He wasn’t certain he would have time. He still had a journal with him to translate between classes, after all…and he was hoping to take five NEWT classes, and Runes at OWL level…

“You could even…” Hector hesitated, glancing at Pandora. “I mean, that Slytherin you’re friends with, Snape? You could invite him to join. If you want.”

“Severus and I aren’t friends,” Harry corrected automatically. He almost scoffed at the thought—Harry Potter, friends with Severus Snape—but he had to admit that it wasn’t a ridiculous thing for Hector so suggest. It was what Severus had wanted people to think, after all, to throw off the
Gryffindors. “And I think it would be uncomfortable for everyone if he were to come. Especially for him. He wouldn’t want to join, anyways.”

Hector looked relieved, and then, a moment later, guilty, as he nodded in agreement. “It’s just… Lily doesn’t care for him much, after last year, I don’t think.”

“Yeah.”

“But you’ll come, won’t you? You got top marks in Defense; Cat is going to be after you all year on that. And she did help you with Herbology…”

Harry frowned, pausing mid-yawn. “I got top marks?”

“Cat wrote Flitwick over the summer. She’s competitive about these things, you know. She only managed to top Arithmancy, so she’ll be pestering you to lead the group for Defense, and Lily for Charms. And Potions, I suppose, without Snape—he and Lily used to take top marks together.”

“I’m not going to lead the group in anything,” Harry said, alarmed. “I’ll sit in again, if you insist, but I’m not… no.”

That sounded terrifyingly like the DA, and—no, Harry was not going to think about that!

“Alright.” Hector studied him curiously. “I know you don’t like crowds, but… well, I’d have thought you were used to the group by now.”

“I wouldn’t like to lead, either,” said Pandora. “It’s too much responsibility, especially the way Cat pushes. Takes the fun out of it.”

“I enjoy it,” Hector said.

“You’re also going for a full course-load of NEWTs. People like me and Harry, going for five or six—we’re not the same.”


“I could do independent study for three more. Cat tried to talk Flitwick into letting her do that with Muggle Studies, but he said no,” Hector pointed out. “And it’s all a matter of time management, which I’m good at. I don’t need straight O’s, and I always make sure to get enough sleep and three full meals a day.”

“And I think we’re keeping Harry up,” said Pandora, flashing Harry a smile as she stood up. “If you’re going to mother him, you can’t be part of the problem, Hector.”

“Hey!” said Hector indignantly. “You’re the one who wanted to hear about the library tonight, rather than waiting until tomorrow!”

“But I’m not the one mothering him,” she replied. “And since Cat is probably out of the shower by now, I am the one cutting us off to go to sleep. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

She left, and Hector sighed. “Well, she’s right,” he said, eyeing Harry. “You really should get some sleep, you know. I thought—it doesn’t matter now, I guess. Would you like the first shower?”

Harry shook his head, and slowly pulled himself up. Hani had already moved his things into the wardrobe for him, but even changing out of his robes seemed like quite a bit of effort. “I’ll take mine
“Alright, then,” said Hector, and he dug about in his trunk for his toiletries, while Harry kicked off his socks and fell face-first down onto the bed.

He was asleep before Hector even left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, wow. Editing this chapter really put me through my paces, because it was at a point where it had to be almost completely re-written. It gained a few sections in there, too (more than the few that were taken away) and the result is this monster. Unfortunately, there's still a lot of exposition going on here, but I (clearly) didn't have a better way to get the set-up for the year to come out of the way while keeping the story moving. And there ended up being more Hector and Pandora than I had originally intended, so if it seems like a lot--it is. They serve important purposes later on, so establishing their characters more firmly earlier on (as well as getting in some foreshadowing, good luck if you want to go searching for it) was necessary. But if you'd rather I focus more on more established canon characters, you're in luck. We've got quite a bit of Snape coming up, and we are getting closer to Voldemort's dramatic entrance!

Anyhow, I'm not going to apologize for the infodump of political discussion that took over the last third of the chapter, persay, because there's going to be more of it coming, at least on the side of the Ministry/Wizengamot and Death Eater conflict. The Fawley stuff--that comes from a Very Large family tree I've been working on connecting together all the main political players on the scene. In the future, political stuff will be more integrated with the action, rather than just Harry having chats while eating.

Thank you for your comments and kudos! See you all next time!
Hi! It's, um. It's been a while, hasn't it? You'd think maybe I'd have finished this story by now. Spoiler! I haven't. I still have five chapters unfinished and the thought of editing this beast (which is currently at.... 408k) is literally the stuff of nightmares. And it needs editing. Badly. Really badly. Fun!

But it is now December, and I said I would start posting again. So, having weighed my options... I'm going to post it. Largely unedited.

The horror.

The thing is, while this story isn't nearly at the quality level I would like it to be, and while I have been tempted to throw it away for the sake of re-starting entirely, I'm more interested in working on other things. If you've read Grey Space, well, that was a story that emerged out of my sheer desire not to work on this one. As are the two other AU stories I'm working on. Not that I'm not still fond of this story (doing my surface-level edits of this chapter really reminded my of that), quite simply, I have spent over a year working on it with as much regularity as anyone could reasonably expect from a person, and yet it is not finished. And that, friends, is my real goal: to be done with this.

Also, because this is technically the first of what was intended to be a three-part series. Whoops.

Anyways! As you read this, please understand that as a story, it deserves much more editing than I am going to give it. There are points where character motivations are really not made clear. Also, repetition that isn't going to be cut out. I hope that it doesn't take away from your enjoyment of the story.

And thank you, as always, for reading!

September treated the sixth years like doomed vessels on stormy seas: they were knocked about, capsized, torn to pieces, and nearly drowned under the workload of their NEWT-level classes. Harry was taking Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, Herbology, and Defense all at NEWT level, and OWL-level Ancient Runes as well. Unlike the previous year, he no longer had the benefit of having taken the classes once already, and though his high marks from the previous year certainly got him off to a good start, NEWT classes really were at a whole new level. If it weren't for Hector's insistence on continuing the weekly study group, he was sure he would have failed at least one of his exams by now, but they kept him on track.

Hector and Catarina were taking identical nine-NEWT schedules. If they weren't in class, eating, or doing homework, they were making revision schedules and comparing notes. And yet still Hector was getting more regular sleep than Harry.
“It’s about organization,” Hector told him one morning over breakfast, as Harry scrambled to finish a transfiguration assignment. “And prioritization. Sleep will always be more important.”

Well, so long as he didn’t appear to be on the verge of any breakdowns, Harry let Hector be. He was having enough trouble keeping up with his own workload without being driven batty; McGonagall seemed to expect that none of them would ever sleep again, and after the ‘O’ on his potions OWL, Slughorn was putting more pressure on him than before.

Of course, he also had Severus to thank for his continued high marks. Severus, who was taking eight NEWT level classes and tutoring several underclassmen, had made a habit of regularly going over homework with Harry, and somehow still had time to keep up with current events.

"They’ve made another arrest," he would say, falling into a seat at Harry’s usual library table like he had been doing so for years and throwing a copy of the *Daily Prophet* or the *Hermes Herald* on top of whatever Harry was working on. Harry would sigh, and with a practiced air of long-suffering tolerance pick up the newspaper and read whatever article Severus was up in arms about today.

It was an act he was growing all too accustomed to. Whether the year before had really been uneventful or Harry had just been so isolated that he had not hear about it, it seemed that over the summer the political cauldron had begun to overboil.

"It's all a front," Severus would say. "Bastards think they're being clever covering it up like this. They don't even know what they're going after. Arresting whatever sorry shit-stained arseholes they can find in Knockturn, just to make it look like they're getting something done."

If it was a bill stuck in Wizengamot deliberations, he was equally derisive.

"Cowards, cowed by a little spot of murder. They’ve been assigned an auror each, and they are still pissing their pants in fear. It's a bloody waste of taxes. If they're on the Wizengamot, you'd think that they’d at least be half-decent wizards. Able to cast a bloody *protego* ."

“Speaking of,” Harry would re-direct. “Weren’t we going to go over shield charm classes for Professor Burke’s exam? It’s in the syllabus, but he hasn’t mentioned them once… Do you have your books?”

Harry was beginning to make sense of the political climate, despite Severus's commentary, but it was slow going. When he knew Severus was in class, he found a book on government to at least get a better understanding of what was going on, but it had made Harry's head hurt. Strangely enough, they never learned about these things in History of Magic, or if they did, it was inNEWT-level and Harry had given that up. Still, he was versed enough that when Severus threw down the *Prophet* on October fifteenth and the headline CROUCH AND BAGNOLD SPEARHEAD REVISED BILL ON USE OF MAGIC, he had to frown.

“Wasn’t that the one that a guy was killed over this summer?” he asked.

“Oh, so you *can* pay attention, so long as there’s death involved. How macabre.”

Harry rolled his eyes and grabbed for the article. At least it would tell him what was going on without insulting him.

He had heard that Barty Crouch Sr had been promoted to Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Everyone in Ravenclaw had, with Crouch Jr in their house, even Harry, who tended to avoid the fourth year knowing that he was going to grow into a Death Eater, if he wasn’t already on the way there. The papers seemed to find Crouch Sr a marked improvement from the last head, who
had resigned after the Wizengamot murder fiasco. Apparently, Millicent Bagnold had been promoted to fill the role that was left open by the death, and was now serving as the head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. Harry recognized her name, too—she was the Minister before Fudge, though he wasn’t sure when she was going to be promoted to that. It was a turnabout that she and Crouch were pushing for the bill to pass, seeing as the previous DMAC head had been so against it, and the paper seemed to anticipate that it’s readers would think she was being a coward. But overall, it seemed to go mildly on her, at least by Harry’s standards, having been a target of the Daily Prophet’s ire himself.

“If they’re Libs, why are they supporting the bill?” Harry asked Severus, when the article didn’t hold the answer. “I thought it was…”

Severus glared at him. “Are you actually interested?” he said snidely.

“Aren’t you supposed to be happy about that?” Harry wondered. “You’ve been throwing papers at me for a month and a half; I thought you wanted me to read them.”

For a moment Severus looked pleased, but then he narrowed his eyes. “Where do you stand on the bill, then?”

Harry glanced down at the article again. The bill was supposed to make it easier for wizards to defend against potential breaks of the Statute of Secrecy. It proposed to loosen restrictions on what magic could be used against muggles in self-defense, even allowing for wizards to obliviate muggles themselves in the instance that the Aurors and Obliviators were not on scene. Harry supposed that was reasonable, since the Aurors were already stretched thin, but having once seen an obliviation spell dramatically backfire, it seemed rather dangerous. Besides, it would make it easier for wizards to use magic against muggles and get away with it, which in a period of increased muggle-baiting seemed like a bad idea.

That was what the Libs, the liberals in the Wizengamot, had argued the first time the bill came up. The opposition was the conservative Lits, short for “Elites”, who mostly stood for old pureblood interests, as far as Harry understood it.

“Neutral,” Harry said after thinking about it.

Severus groaned. “You can’t be neutral about every single thing, ” he insisted.

“I can and I will,” said Harry. “I don’t know enough to pass judgement myself, and I don’t want to get involved. I’m not going to go around making uneducated declarations, with the attacks and arrests.”

“Then educate yourself, you ignorant berk! You can’t just expect to stay on the sidelines and get out of this…”

“Alive?” Harry finished for him, unimpressed. “Somehow, I think getting involved would endanger my life more. Anyways, aren’t I making progress towards being educated by asking you?”

Severus rolled his eyes, crossed his arms, and slumped back into his seat. By now, Harry was used to him as a teenager, with his award-worthy sulks and tendency towards profanity, but if he put his mind to comparing the boy to the professor he would come to be, Harry couldn’t help but laugh. Luckily he had gotten better at managing his poker face after about the seventh time his smiling had Severus implying that he was mentally unwell.

“They aren’t Libs,” Severus answered, even as he darkened his scowl. “At least, Crouch isn’t, not
really. But they’re pushing for it, because the government has to do something, no matter what that block Minchum is going for.”

“That ‘block’ is the Minister.”

“And if he had his way, we’d all be sitting around with tea and biscuits chatting about the weather and nothing else. When they ousted Jenkins, people thought he’d at least do something, but all he’s done is double the guard on Azkaban and throw funding at the DMAC’s propaganda department.”

“The Department of Accidents and Catastrophes is in charge of propaganda?” Harry asked, furrowing his brow. “I thought they were supposed to be in charge of, you know, accidental magic, enforcing the Statute of Secrecy, whatever.”

“Think about it for a minute. They’re in charge of covering stuff up in the muggle world. Who better to keep shit out of the wizarding press then the ones so good at blocking it from the muggles?”

Harry frowned. It made sense, he supposed. In ‘93, when Sirius had escaped from Azkaban, the muggle news had reported on him, but it had just made him sound like a regular criminal, rather than a wizard; that story had have come from somewhere. And he knew personally that the Ministry would see no fault in taking over the press with their own version of events. Since Voldemort’s rise after the Triwizard Tournament, the *Prophet* had been running press about his and Dumbledore’s alleged insanity rather than actually discussing any news. Still, it was strange to think about the government having a built in section devoted to propaganda. Wouldn’t people protest that?

“In any case, it has been suggested,” Severus went on, his lips curling back into that unpleasant smile, “that civil unrest is about as big of a catastrophe as the establishment is going to face.”

“You sound awfully satisfied about that,” Harry noted dryly.

“Of course I am.” Severus leaned forward to fix Harry with his persistent stare. “The current system is completely disorganized, ineffective, and bogged down in politicians with their heads so far up their asses they can watch their caviar and foie gras assimilating into the shit they’ve gone and stuffed their previously vacated skulls with.”

Harry laughed, then slapped his hand over his mouth, remembering that they were in the library. “That doesn’t even make sense, Sev,” he said when he could get it out. “I mean, I get what you’re saying, I think, but… no.”

“Taxidermy in it’s most subsidized form.”

“Sev.”

“Do you disagree?”

Harry shook his head, still shaking at Severus’s particularly crass eloquence, and took off his glasses to wipe the tears from his eyes. “You’re horrible,” he said. “But from the politicians I’ve met, they seem to take it as their job to be…”

“You’ve met politicians?”

Shit.

His slip was sobering, at least, and he stumbled for an out. “Wouldn’t you count Dumbledore as a politician?”
For a moment, he thought that Severus was going to call his bluff, but then the boy grinned. *Grinned.* He had seen Severus smile before, of course, but it was mostly like the horrible twisted one he had been wearing a moment before. “You admit to disliking Dumbledore, then!”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Yes you did! You think he’s full of shit! You—”

He was cut off by Madam Pince dropping a heavy stack of books on a shelf near them, making both boys jump. “Quiet down or I’ll have you banned for the year,” she hissed.

They both nodded, and when she stormed away Harry glared at Severus, pushing the newspaper away. He couldn’t be kicked out of the library. He needed it, to get home, and without the invisibility cloak he wouldn’t be able to sneak in without Pince noticing.

“Stop trying to get me to be something I’m not, Severus,” he said firmly. “I’m not interested.”

“But you are, anyone with half a brain can see it—”

“Then you’re hallucinating.”

“Then what about Dumbledore? You just said he was full of shit.”

“You said that,” Harry muttered, dropping his voice even further and hoping Severus would take the hint. “I think he’s a bit of an ass, sure, after what happened last year. He’s biased, clearly, or we wouldn’t have been punished along with Potter and Black for them attacking you. That has nothing to do with what I think about his politics.”

“Fine! What do you think, then?”

“I don’t,” Harry hissed. “I have better things to worry about. Like our Charms homework. Weren’t we going to trade our essays? I still have to finish mine. Have you?”

Severus bristled, but he finally seemed to accept that he wasn’t going to get anything out of Harry. Or, at least, he didn’t say anything further as Harry pointedly returned to his reading, but he was probably just thinking of his next plan of attack. Harry left him to it. Even if being stared while Severus plotted at was annoying, he shouldn’t have entertained the topic in the first place.

Severus, however, was persistent. If they weren’t in the library, he did not hesitate to bring things up elsewhere, even in class. Potions was the worst. Slughorn’s year-old prediction that Severus would have Harry as his NEWT Potions’ partner had come to pass, though it was more that Lily outright refused to talk to Severus than by any testament to their teamwork, though Harry had caught her watching them several times. Either way, it gave Severus up to four hours with a week with Harry stuck as a captive audience.

“You know,” Severus would say as they worked together to brew the medical diagnostic potions Slughorn had them working on. “A few substitutions and we could brew the potion the Wizengamot has in debate for making standard right now.”

“The Wizengamot wants everyone tested for the East Amazon Malady?”

“No, you prat. It’s not so different from the potion used to test for blood relations.”

“...the Wizengamot wants to know exactly who is related to who? Are they finally cracking down on inbreeding?”
Severus sighed. “Stop being deliberately thick.”

“I’m not. If that’s not it, you’ve lost me.”

“Think. If they could issue a standard test, they could reclaim the Seats of Inheritance that have become Seats of the Elect!”

Apparently, when a bloodline died out, the family’s Seat in the Wizengamot was reappropriated to become an Seat filled by election. Harry had understood that much of his crash course in government. “So… it’s a Lit proposal, then?”

“Not at all.”

“But I thought the Lits were against having more elected Seats. Since they’re mostly Inheritance.”

“That’s true. But testing for blood relations doesn’t take into account blood status. Imagine, some muggleborn turns out to have a squib grandparent, and they take the Seat. The Lits would rather try their chances with bribing the minister to nominate purebloods for the Elect, even if that hardly works.”

“Why not?”

“You have to have something of a career, to be considered for nomination. Old blood doesn’t do careers, just political nepotism.”

“Aren’t you a Lit?”

Severus scoffed. “Don’t be daft.”

Harry frowned, but Slughorn was coming over to check on their potion, and the conversation ended when the professor and their resident genius got into an argument over one of the improvisational changes Severus was making to the recipe. He filed the conversation away, though. A potion that would check for blood relations was not something he wanted to run into, not while he was trying to keep a low profile here in the seventies. It wouldn’t do to have someone figure out he was related to the Potters, let alone Lily Evans.

Hector and Pandora, at least, seemed to accept Harry’s proclaimed neutrality and silence on the issues they discussed over the breakfast table. Well, mostly. Hector was more likely to grow irritated with Harry’s clumsy non sequiturs of disinterest, but usually Pandora could get him off Harry’s case. He was grateful for her interference, though there was a nagging guilt lurking in his gut. She had family who had died for the rights of muggleborns and half-bloods, and had no qualms making her own views clear. And if anyone stood a chance at convincing him choose a stance, it would be her, but Pandora seemed to have an endless supply of tolerance and understanding.

“Harry has a much of a right to his lack of opinion as you do to your strong one, Hector,” she would say. “Whether it’s a reservation of judgement until more facts are known, as he says, or cowardice, as you say, or something else entirely, it is his choice. I can respect that.”

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Hector, on the other hand… not so much.
"I don’t get it,” he said one night, when both he and Harry were kept awake by thunder that was practically shaking Ravenclaw tower. “How can you live with yourself? People are dying. I can’t imagine not standing up for what I believe in.”

Harry sighed, trying to focus on the journal he was still translating. If only Hector knew how hard it was, to hold his tongue! Every time one of Severus’s housemates used the word ‘mudblood’, he didn’t dare risk any more than calling out the rudeness of the term, which only earned him irritated glances from everyone involved. His status as a virtual nobody let him overhear far more things than he would otherwise, but for every plot of hate crimes disguised as bullying he uncovered, he had hours of internal debate over whether the risk of upsetting the future was worth sacrificing his moral center for before he could convince himself that he really couldn’t bring it up to the prefects or professors. After, when he heard about the plot’s success or failure, the debate began all over again, made fresh with the curse of hindsight.

Was it worth it? He didn’t know. He began a list, which he kept folded in the pages of his occlumency book, of everyone he had failed to help. When he returned to the future, he vowed he would do better. Until then, all he could do was devote himself to getting back.

He couldn’t tell that to Hector, though. “I can’t in good conscious condemn someone without knowing the full story,” he lied between his teeth. “Frankly, speaking my opinions on things I don’t understand would make me even more of an idiot. If that makes me a bad person, then so be it.”

“But you’re not!” Hector cried, sitting up in his bed. “You’re a decent person through and through. You’d give just about anyone a chance, muggleborn or pureblood supremacist—and even if you could deny that, you wouldn’t. Your best friend is a bloody house elf, for that matter!”

That was something of a sore spot between them, on Hector’s side, at least. When Hector had found out that Harry was eating lunch and dinner with Hani, rather than up in the Great Hall with them, he had actually managed to make Pandora angry by implying that there was something wrong with Harry for preferring the company of an elf. Harry had agreed to eating lunch with them three days out of the week (the other two, his schedule did not allow for a lunch hour), but he flat out refused to become a regular at dinner. The whole school attended dinner in the Great Hall at the same time, after all, and while he had finally managed to readjust to the magic of the filled school again, sitting with the lot of them was just a headache. Of course, that had been before they got busy with classes again, and no matter how much Hector complained, he couldn’t deny that it was easier to eat and do homework at the same time in the relative quiet of the kitchen. Hector did complain about it, though, and loudly.

Harry sighed. He missed Ron. The pair of them had plenty of disagreements, but they were usually along the lines of ‘why did you lie to me about the Triwizard tournament’ or ‘why did you talk to Hermione like that’, not ‘why aren’t you getting involved in a dangerous wizarding war’. Hector and Pandora were both much more like Hermione, with her opinions backed by research and historical context combined with her passion for causes like SPEW. He missed her too, but Ron and their generally easy friendship he missed most of all.

"What do you expect me to do, Hector?" he asked, suddenly feeling very tired. "Even if I were to start voicing opinions, making declarations—what then? Take sides with one group or the other? They don't talk about it, but everyone knows. There's a bloody silenced war going on. Talking doesn't do anything." He watched the quill in his hands shake, splattering little dots of ink across his translation. "If you want to make a difference, you have to fight, and once you start fighting, you don't get the choice to stop."

"Bloody hell, Harry! I'm not saying you should become a soldier! Just voice your—"
"This is a war of opinions," Harry cut him off. "Or conflicting ideologies, whatever you want to call it. If you have an opinion, you have chosen your side, and that puts you as much in the fight as anyone else."

Hector scowled. "That's an awfully black and white view of things."

"Is it?" Harry shook his head, though not in disagreement. "I'd rather stay grey, then, I guess."

He wouldn't. If this were his time, he would be out there, finding a way to fight. Some nights, he was halfway tempted to ask Dumbledore to join the Order, even if it might upset the flow of time. Knowing that he was leaving his parents to die... Was it worth it? All that suffering, just to try and maintain what he knew? Was it right, or just selfish?

Hector, not hearing his oft repeated internal debate, tried again. "But you believe—"

"It's not about what I believe, Hector," Harry said flatly.

Hector just sighed, and flopped back onto his bed, and for a moment the tower was silent beyond the rain beating against the windows and the thunder shuddering around them.

"Well," Hector finally said, "I think you're wrong, anyways."

"Really? I never would have guessed."

Hector threw his pillow towards Harry, who was luckily able to flick his wand out to stop it before it crashed into his lap and upturned his ink everywhere. "Shut it. I just mean..."

But Hector trailed away.

Harry sighed again, closed his book, and stoppered his ink. He wouldn't be able to focus well enough to get anywhere with the translation, especially not with Hector stewing across the room.

"What?"

Hector looked over at him. He seemed wary, which was unusual for the outspoken boy, and he reached up to run his hand through his hair, messing it up. That alone would have been a sign that he was distressed by what he wanted to say, even if they hadn't already been arguing.

"Remember what you asked, at the feast?"

Harry thought back, but by now it was mid October, and that had been over a month ago. "Um..."

"You asked what their motive is—these Death Eaters. And I still don't know. All we can really say is they're violent, and they've got some sort of shadowy leader they've thrown their weight behind."

Harry, who had stood to return his books to his desk, froze. That was the first direct mention of Voldemort he'd heard anyone make. Even Severus and his 'friends' in Slytherin were more likely to refer to the Death Eaters as a group than to call out their leader, and if they referred to him at all it was just in pointedly vague pronouns.

"Shadowy leader?" he echoed, returning to his bed to slip under the covers.

"The papers speculate—well, it isn't really important," Hector said. Harry wanted to contradict him, to push for more information, but he knew he couldn't, not if he wanted to convince Hector he was actually neutral. He would just have to search the papers himself... or find a way to ask Severus.

But as he debated the relative risk of that approach (Severus would probably be unsettlingly
enthusiastic given the chance to answer), Hector went on. "My point is... I don't know what they stand for." Hector let that hang between them for a moment, the discomfort of ignorance filling the vaulted ceiling. "Maybe they're a cult, or maybe they have some radical ideas that really could change the world for the better. I don't know." He took a deep breath, and looked over at Harry again, meeting his eyes through the dim. "But I know that I won't stand for violence, and that I believe us muggleborns and half-bloods deserve equality and our muggle relations deserve safety, and they could have me at wand point under threat of death and I would still believe that. There's blood purists who think my parents both ought to be killed, my mother for being a muggle and my father for being a blood traitor. No matter what danger my opinions put me in, I won't back down from any politics trying to give them underhand power over the life and death of my family."

Harry wanted to look away. He believed the same thing—he knew he did! Hermione was a muggleborn, and the Weasleys were called 'blood traitors', and even the Dursleys... he may not like them, but even they did not deserve the violence that Voldemort and his lackeys wished upon them.

Hector looked away first, addressing the ceiling again. "And I—I know I'm not going to be a soldier, or someone who makes a real difference in this fight. I'm not a powerful wizard, not smart enough for tactics, not subtle enough to gather information or go into politics myself... and just a student, too, what power do we have?" His voice curt, bitter, and Harry was reminded of his own thoughts, when he was trying to make sense of why the Order wouldn't let him join in their meetings. "I would just be a risk. A liability. But I will fight in what little capacity I have. I have a voice, and I will make it heard." There was silence between them again, and if not for the absolute stillness of the tower, Harry might not have heard the final sentence he voiced over the patter of the rain. "That's why I don't understand you."

Harry bit his lip. Beyond politics, this was more personal. If the Harry of 1996 were to meet the person he had become in his attempts to get home safely, he didn't think they would have gotten along at all. In 1996, he too had been outspoken, and also emotional, and keen on lashing out against anyone who wanted him to restrain himself or stay away from the fight. Now? He could only justify his neutrality because he had to.

"I think you're wrong, too," he said at last.

"What?" said Hector. He might have been drifting off to sleep—his voice seemed bleary.

"You wouldn't get in the way," Harry said, hesitantly. "You're not... talent doesn't really matter, even if you were the nothing you are trying to convince yourself you are."

"I think I know—"

"But you'd make a good leader, in any case," Harry went on. He wasn't going to get into a battle with Hector over his self-deprecation. "You believe in things, and people can see that."

There was silence for another beat, and then Hector snorted. "Whatever, Harry."

He was unimpressed with Harry's analysis, and Harry supposed he couldn't really blame the other boy. He had done nothing to earn Hector's respect. Even though he had somehow been blessed with the friendship of both Hector and Pandora, he had never done anything to deserve that, and with Hector's views on voices and politics, there was plenty to keep them apart. And Harry... they would probably never know how much he relied on how normal the pair of them were, with how much he was keeping secret. He wouldn't have lasted the previous year without friends to talk to about school gossip and house quidditch and homework. But he never gave them anything. Maybe he could try... as long as he didn't go into detail...
“I can’t—” he stumbled. “I’m not like you. The things… the people I want to protect… anything I do or say, it could be used against them. I make one wrong choice, and everything could be…”

He cut off. It was hopeless; he couldn’t explain himself without giving it away. He hoped that Hector had fallen asleep, and hadn’t even heard his attempt, but when he glanced over, he found Hector staring at him, face briefly illuminated by a flash of lightning.

“What are you talking about?”

Harry opened his mouth, but was cut off by the long rumble of thunder, and shut it again. He reached up and took off his glasses, blurring Hector’s imploring gaze, and set them on his nightstand, rolling to face the other way. With a deep breath in, he began the process of tucking his thoughts away, a meditative approach to occlumency he practiced every night.

“Never mind.”

~

A notice went up in the common room the next morning that any student wishing to celebrate Halloween off campus would need to inform their Head of House of their travel arrangements by the twenty sixth. The holiday fell on a Sunday that year, so they would have morning classes off the next morning and the usual feast, but Harry was surprised to hear that students were allowed to leave campus.

“It’s Hallow’s Eve,” Pandora explained, when they were sitting down in the half empty Transfiguration lecture hall. “There’s still several families who celebrate the Old Ways, and have halloways on their property that they walk.”

“Hallow ways?” Harry echoed.

“The muggles call them holloways, or sunken lanes. They just see them as old roads, but we know better. On Hallow’s Eve, you can walk a halloway with the spirits of the dead. It’s a way to honor and communicate with our ancestors.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Harry said, surprised. It must have fallen out of fashion by the nineties.

“I’m not surprised. It’s an old pureblood tradition, as you might imagine, with how important family and ancestry has always been to us.”

“Are you going to…” Harry trailed off, noting the pensive expression that tightened the lines on her face. “I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to pry.”

“Not at all,” Pandora said, but the lightness in her voice seemed forced. “I haven’t walked myself since I was a small child. There’s a path on the old Fawley estate, but I think it is hard for Father to be so close to Mother like that. I’m told she grew up there, so her spirit is strong and bound to the earth.”

Did she mean to say that they were literally walking with the spirits of the dead? If that was the case, why hadn’t Harry ever heard of it in the nineties? Plenty of the older students at Hogwarts had lost one or both of their parents in the war, but as far as he knew everyone had been required to attend the Halloween feast, and no one left the castle.
“Do many people go?” he asked.

Pandora tilted her head. “Didn’t you notice last year?”

“I spent Halloween with Hani. It’s, uh, my birthday, you know.”

Hector chose that moment to slide into his usual seat on Pandora’s other side. “When’s your birthday?”

“Hallow’s Eve,” Pandora repeated. “An auspicious day to be born. Children born on the holiday are thought to have stronger connections to the dead.” She tilted her head. “You should walk the halloways, if you never have… though… perhaps not. I think you are more eager to escape the shadow of Death, then to walk it. And your path will take you on Death’s road eventually.”

“Morbid,” Hector commented. “But, probably right—unless all your research is a quest for immortality, Harry?”

“Uh, no, thanks,” said Harry, his nose wrinkling up. From his experience with Voldemort, immortality looked to be an incredibly painful, dehumanizing process, and not something he would ever be interested in.

“Anyways, if your birthday is on Halloween, we should all go down to the Three B’s and get you a firewhiskey! You’ll be seventeen, right?”

Harry grimaced. “I don’t think they’d serve a student firewhiskey, seventeen or not. But I could go for some butterbeer. I need to stop by Tomes and Scrolls, anyways…”

“We’ll go right after lunch,” Pandora said. “You’ll have others to meet up with that afternoon, I’m sure.”

Harry, who would rather hide in the kitchens with Hani than get pulled off to the feast with his Ravenclaw friends, just nodded. In truth, his birthday plans mostly consisted of staying up until midnight the night before, like he used to at the Dursleys, but they didn’t really need to know that.

Hector opened his mouth to add something, but before he could, there was a commotion out in the hall. Harry turned, but a large crowd was coming in, and he could not see what was going on, only hear the laughter and several voices—

“Bloody Hufflepuffs!” a familiar voice cursed.

“Oh, come on, Prongs. You don’t like looking like a pureblood ponce?” That was unmistakably Sirius. Harry could just make out the top mess of dark hair through the crowd. They were pushing through, trying to get to their usual seats in the back corner.

“Very funny, coming from you…” James snapped darkly.

“It’s not that bad,” Peter’s nasally voice added. “You look very well put together.”

“He looks like your mom got a hold of him, Peter,” Remus added sarcastically, emerging from the crowd.

“Shut it, Moony!”

A moment later, it became clear what they were arguing about. James emerged from the crowd, but he was hardly recognizable: his usual bird’s nest of black hair was falling in sleek waves down to his
shoulders. He really did have a point—Sirius had no right to be laughing, because with his hair so well-groomed they looked more like brothers than friends. Harry remembered that there had been Potters on the Black family tree, so he supposed that shouldn't really be surprising.

"Dumping a whole bloody bottle of Sleekeazy," James growled, stalking forward. "It's an insult! That potion was invented by my dad, you know—what are you laughing at, Harrigan?"

James had caught him staring. Harry held up his hands, trying to stifle his laughter. He wondered if he would look like that, if Aunt Petunia had known about Sleekeazy. He hadn't realized it was a Potter's invention, but he wasn't surprised; their hair was legendary for being impossible to tame.

"He was probably just wondering if you could get him a bottle," Sirius said, his tone bored as he flicked his grey eyes over to where Harry sat. "You know, since his hair is, well, like that."

"Like what?" another voice cut in. Harry turned to find Lily entering the room with her friend Mary, hand on her hip as she looked over at the marauders, unimpressed. James perked up for a moment, as he always did, the dog, but then he remembered that his pride and joy, his unmanageable hair, was so horribly defiled, and sank back into a sulk, slumping in the seat he had claimed.

"Sorry, Evans," Sirius quipped, "But no amount of Sleekeazy's can save you from being a carrot-head."

"Shut up, Padfoot," James moaned, but Lily just raised her eyebrows.

"And no amount of time is ever going to save you from being an absolute arse, Black," she shot back. "More than likely, Harrigan here was just observing the marked improvement to your friend's usual appearance. You know, since he doesn't look like he had to race here from being late and fell down the stairs while he was at it."

Harry shrunk a bit in his seat, not wanting to get caught up in the middle of one of their arguments. Sirius scoffed, though behind him, James' face contorted, and his mouth fell open a bit, trying to figure out if he had actually just heard her right.

"He looks like a dolt, Evans," Sirius said. "Just because you have the fashion sense of someone's grandmother doesn't mean the rest of us have to be so uptight."

"Funny. No wonder you haven't had a date this whole year, Black. Seeing as you think you're so fashionable. Did it really never cross your mind that to get a girl to notice you, you'd have to appeal to one? Instead you're such a narcissist that so long as you like the face you find in the mirror, you're happy. Can't find a better date than yourself, I suppose."

Seeing as they were insulting each other across the classroom, everyone heard her words and laughed. Sirius was turning red with fury, but Remus grabbed him before he could start towards the girl.

"If you like it so much, maybe you should go out with him," Sirius snarled instead, trying to break free of Remus's grip.

If it had been anyone else they were talking about, that wouldn't have made any sense, but seeing as it was James, and Lily's very public rejections of him were well-known to everyone in the school, the challenge warranted just as much of a response from their classmates as Lily's insult had.

James, at least, was not amused. "Lay off, Sirius," he grumbled, snagging his friend's arm and tugging him down towards the bench. "You're insulting me as much as her, now—"
“Maybe I will!” Lily snapped back, over the top of him.

The classroom stared in surprise. Was Lily Evans actually considering going out with James Potter? After five years of snubbing and rejecting so much as a seat beside him at the dinner table?

"Wait, what?" James, the most surprised of them all, asked.

"Yeah," said Lily. Her face was flushing almost as red as her hair at this point, as if she hadn't meant to say that at all, but now her own stubbornness was forcing her to go along with it. "Fine! Potter keeps his hair like that until Halloween, and he can come with me to Hogsmeade!"

"You have got to be kidding me," Sirius intoned. "Keep his hair like that? He looks like a—"

But he was cut off by Remus grabbing his head and ducking him down.

"You're certain?" James said. He looked thoroughly alarmed, as though this had to be some sort of trick. "That's—that's all I have to do? Sleek'my hair?"

Lily rolled her eyes. "Oh, please," she said, the blush abating somewhat as she finally moved to fall into her seat. "As if it were that easy for you to quit being so full of yourself."

James, however, did not seem to take insult to this, and had quite forgotten the gloom inspired by his shining hair. He jumped up, shouting: "I'm going to Hogsmeade with Evans!"

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall, bustling into the classroom, snapped over the laughter filling the space. "Do contain yourself, or you will have detention for every Hogsmeade weekend for the rest of the year!" That quieted the boy down quickly. The other students, though they were whispering frantically among each other, hurried to find their seats.

"Did that really just happen?" Harry heard Hector whispered. "All that build up, just for that? Does anyone really expect a functional relationship to arise from insulting each other?"

"They're Gryffindors," Pandora murmured back. "That's about as functional as it gets, poor dears."

Harry, however, was only half paying attention to them. While Lily sat blushing under her friends' giggling chatter and James grinning like a maniac and high-fiving Pettigrew, Harry was watching the door, where Severus had stood not a moment before, only to disappear back out into the hall.

He didn't reappear for the whole of class. One of the other Slytherins made up a story to cover for him, about going to the Hospital Wing sick, but Harry had seen Severus, and while he had looked particularly ashen, he doubted it was because the Slytherin boy was sick. Still, he tried to focus on the lecture, pushing thoughts of his future professor's apparent horror that his parents were finally going out on a date to the back of his mind.

Besides, these were his parents! He'd gotten to know Lily in the revision group, though he tried not to be obvious with his staring and keep their conversation to a minimum, and James was… well, he wasn't so bad, this year. He left Severus alone, at least, which was—and damn it, here he was thinking about Severus again. Bloody Severus Snape! What was the world coming to?

His attempts to focus on the lesson instead did not go well. He accidentally turned his cheese into a mouse trap instead of a mouse, much to Hector's amusement and McGonagall's dismay (That shouldn't even be possible, Mr Harrigan; get your magic under control!), but everyone was just as distracted, anxious to get out of the classroom and spread the latest bit of gossip to the rest of the school. Apparently he was the only one to notice Severus's swift departure; even the Slytherins who had covered him seemed unconcerned. When the bell at the end of class rang, he packed up his
things quickly and hurried out of the room, only to be grabbed just outside the door and dragged into a niche behind a nearby suit of armor before he could protest.

Lily held up a finger to her lips, and Harry nodded, slowly, waiting for the bulk of their classmates to hurry by. The marauders were among the last out, James and Sirius bickering about his chances of actually keeping his hair like that for the next two weeks, and when they were gone the pair let out a long breath.

"Sorry," said Lily, realizing she was still holding Harry's arm tightly and letting go. "I—I am such an idiot."

"Uh," said Harry, rubbing at the tender spot. "That's alright? I think?"

"I needed to ask you to do something, and they're trying to kill me, I swear," she went on. "It's my own fault—bloody Sirius Black—but I couldn't stand to be mobbed..."

"I understand," said Harry. "Except—did you really just ask James Potter out to Hogsmeade? I mean, it's not my place to judge, but... Potter? I thought you hated him?"

"I know," she moaned, tugging at her hair. "Well, Potter's not as bad, this year. It's mostly Black causing trouble—you have to have noticed?"

Harry shrugged. Here they were again. James had seemed rather subdued, if you could count 'not hexing underclassmen between every class' as subdued and—

For God’s sake, his mother was talking to him, as weird of a thought as that was. Why on earth did his mind keep turning to Snape!

"Anyways, that's not what I needed you for—I mean it is, sort of."

"I don't really know Potter," he said, alarmed. "If you're trying to get out of it. You should tell Lupin to call it off, or—"

"No, that's not it..." She sighed, and met his eyes, chewing on her lip. "You're a... decent bloke, Harrigan."

He blinked. "Thanks?"

"But your choices in friends are..."

"This is about Severus, isn't it," he said, dropping his voice a bit. Of course it was.

"Yes," she said. "I... he doesn't exactly..."

"You guys were friends, and you called it off, but he's still going to be upset that you asked out his tormentor," Harry summarized.

"He's stopped!" Lily insisted. "Potter, I mean. They've been leaving Sev a—I mean, Snape. They've been leaving him alone. And it's not like he doesn't—"

"Don't you dare say he deserves it," Harry hissed, pulling away from her. Mother or not—

"No! Of course not!" Lily looked around quickly, hoping not to have drawn anyone's attention, but it was time for lunch and the corridor was empty. "I just mean. He antagonizes them just as much. I can see that now. I just..." She sighed, and leaned back against the wall. "He's going to be upset, whether he admits to it or not. You're his friend, aren't you?"
"I don't know if Severus really does ‘friends’ any more, or if I’d count myself as one," Harry said dryly. "But we study together regularly, if that's enough."

"He likes you, though; anyone in Potions can see that."

"I don't think Severus really likes anyone," Harry protested. *Except you, apparently*, he didn't add.

"Well, you like him well enough, then, and he tolerates you, which is more than he does for most people."

"Fine," Harry said. "I'm sorry, but, what's the point of this? You've made it clear that you want nothing to do with him, so I'm a little uncomfortable with you bringing this up. I respect you, but if you're going to judge me for spending time with him..."

“No, of course not,” said Lily. “If you—it’s your prerogative, if you can stand the sort of things he believes in. I don’t understand it at all, but that’s not... I just...” She sighed. “Can you look out for him, Harrigan?”

“What?” said Harry. Look out for Severus? Regardless of their deal at the end of the previous year, he really didn’t think Severus needed or wanted anyone ‘looking out for’ him. And, as Lily had said, the Marauders had lightened up on their all-out war against the Slytherins from the year before, including their vendetta against Severus. Harry wasn’t sure what had happened over the summer. Maybe they had heeded Dumbledore’s lecture and wised up to the larger conflict going on outside of the school grounds, or maybe now that Lily was ignoring Severus, James didn’t feel the need to bully the boy, and his friends followed his lead. Either way, Severus had come back from the summer with several new curses in his already vast repertoire, curses that he recorded in the margins of his potions textbook and was clearly itching to test.

“He wasn’t in the hospital wing. We had Arithmancy first period this morning, and he was there, and he wasn’t sick at all.”

“No. He heard you ask Potter out. I saw him in the doorway.”

She winced, but caught herself, and shook her head. “Well, I’m not going to let him influence who I spend my time with,” she said firmly. “He lost that right. But...” She looked directly into Harry’s eyes, pleading, “He’s not exactly got a lot of friends. Especially not friends with his best interest in mind. Can you make sure he’s okay?”

Harry nodded, slowly. It was a relief to find that Lily, at least, hadn’t fallen to the same level as James had been. He shouldn’t have doubted it—he knew she was a good person, and while Severus’s general existence seemed to mess up everything he had thought he’d known about his parents, he shouldn’t have expected Lily to have abandoned her strength of character just because she’d asked James out. But when she pulled Harry into a hug, he stiffened in surprise.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’d... better go. Don’t want things to get too out of hand.”

“Right,” said Harry, though his heart was only half into it. He’d just been hugged by his mother, after all.

Lily hurried out from behind the suit of armor while Harry regained his composure. He wasn’t sure why he was so riled up all of a sudden. He’d been in nearly daily contact with his parents for over a year, and they weren’t his parents, not yet, really, but at the same time... Maybe unexpected time travel had some benefits to it.

He emerged a moment later, and ran promptly into Hector. “Sorry!”
Hector opened his mouth, and closed it just as promptly, glancing down the hall that Lily had just disappeared down. “Uh, Harry?” he said. “You just emerged from a hidden nook ten seconds after a girl, grinning like an idiot. Not to mention Evans, who’s now spoken for. Got something to fess up to?”

It took Harry a moment to understand what Hector was implying, but when he did, he retched. “No! For Merlin’s—she just—you and everyone else just heard her—”

“The lady doth protest too much—”

Harry rolled his eyes and pushed past Hector, hurrying off towards the Great Hall. Lily was his *mother*, for goodness sake; that sort of joking about was just—*ick*. Not that Hector knew that he was implying incest, but…

“I am actually curious what you two were doing in there,” Hector said, falling in step.

“Sounds tough.”

“Alright, keep your secrets, then. You’d make a terrible couple, anyways.”

“Probably.”

“I’m serious, you wouldn’t be cute at all. There’s something about you two… makes you look related.”

Harry stiffened as they crossed into the main foyer, but he forced his shoulders to remain relaxed. Even if Hector thought they looked related, there was no possible way he could guess that Harry was literally Lily’s son. It just wasn’t a place a normal mind would go. “ Weird,” he said.

“No, really, I’m serious,” Hector said. They made their way into the Great Hall, where Pandora was already waiting at the table. They had to squeeze past the crowd that was gathered around the Gryffindors’ table, more than likely students amused by the change to James’s hair or sharing in the gossip of his and Lily’s apparent change in status, but it apparently wasn’t enough to distract Hector, who craned to find Lily at the table.

“Did you ask Professor McGonagall about the exam?” Pandora asked as they sat down.

“What exam?” Harry asked in alarm.

“The one on Monday after Halloween,” Hector said, “but she said that if we were really so concerned, we should practice our impervious charms.”

“Wait, why are we worried?” Harry pressed.

“It’s going to rain on the first,” Pandora said. “We’re supposed to be outside, sorting transfigured objects from non-transfigured objects down on the edge of the Forest. Everyone is going to be miserable.”

Harry relaxed a bit, shrugging. If that was what the exam was going to be, he wasn’t concerned—there was at least some value to being stuck sensitive to magic. There were always telltale traces left behind by transfiguration, like on his forehead, where Dumbledore’s spell was keeping his scar disguised as a straight line.

“Did your conversation with Evans go well?” Pandora then asked, smiling brightly even as Harry choked on the chicken he was taking a bite of.
"He's insisting that it was just a conversation," Hector said, with a smirk that implied he clearly thought otherwise. "But we all know that nook is where—"

"Hector!" Harry hissed, shoving the other boy with his shoulder. "We—for the last time, we were just—"

"Relax, Harry," Pandora advised. "He's just teasing. After all, there's something much stronger between you and Evans than a snog behind a suit of armor would allow for."

"That's what I said!" Hector insisted, turning around to scan the Gryffindor table again. "They look like they're related, don't they? It's the..." He looked back and forth between Harry and where Lily presumably sat. "It's got to be..."

"It's the hair," Pandora said.

"The hair!" Hector exclaimed, and he sat down properly. "Yes, that's it."

"Wait," said Harry. "Are you... could you really not figure out that we both have red hair?"

Hector shrugged. "I mean, it's obvious now that I'm thinking about it."

"Besides, it's not just Evans you look similar to, Harry. There's someone else, too..." said Pandora thoughtfully. Harry looked up and found her grey eyes tracing his face, and glancing over his shoulder towards Gryffindor table, as Hector had done. Harry hoped she wasn't looking towards the Marauders, because even with all the freckles, he knew he still had the same nose as James...

"Chester MacMillan!" Hector exclaimed.

Harry was confused for a second, but then he looked down the table, finding Chester, the seventh year prefect, looking at them in surprise. Harry sighed and rolled his eyes, shoving Hector's arm again, and Chester gave an understanding smile and looked away.

"You're just choosing red-heads, aren't you," Harry said, turning back to his lunch.

"Well, it is a rather important feature, wouldn't you say?" Hector said, unapologetic. "But—who were you going to say, Pandora?"

"Sirius Black," she answered, biting into a carrot.

This time Harry really did choke, and Hector had to pound on his back for him to get past the chunk of carrot that had been lodged there. "You got something against Black, Harry?" he asked as Harry took frantic gulps of pumpkin juice.

"He's a little, um..."

"Well, you're much less haughty," said Pandora. "But related, definitely. You must have some Black blood in you. Was your mother a Black?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know, but probably not, considering—as Hector is so focused on, I'm a redhead!"

"Yes, well," she said, frowning.

"Besides, Black is a bit of a pompous ass, don't you think?" Hector said. "I don't think Harry's quite that much of a jerk. Doesn't go around hexing people, for one—did you see Alicia Gilbert's hair?"
“What happened to it?” Harry asked.

“Full frizz bomb. Her friends in Slytherin were the ones who got Potter with the Sleekeazy, as far as I can tell.”

“Huh,” said Harry. “Well, good on them, I guess.”

“Yeah, though I suppose Potter got what he wanted out of it.”

Harry sighed. He had almost forgotten about Lily’s request, for a moment, but now he had to scan the Slytherin table. Severus wasn’t there.

As Hector and Pandora veered off into a conversation regarding magical hair dressing, Harry quickly shovelled down his lunch, and excused himself for the library. He wasn’t entirely sure he would find Severus there; if he really was so upset over Lily’s and James’s bargain, he could be hiding in the Slytherin dorm where no one would find him. If Harry had the invisibility cloak, he might have been able to follow a group in there, but as it was he had to hope that Severus had taken up at their usual table.

Luck was on his side, and soon Harry found himself standing over the spot, where Severus had spread out a pile of books and was working on homework. So he hadn’t been hidden, persay, but now that Harry was here, he didn’t exactly know what to say. Lily had just said ‘look after him’, but what exactly that meant...

“What do you want, Harrigan?” Severus asked when he had stood there for an awkward minute of silence. Harry flinched. ‘Harrigan’ Severus usually reserved for when Harry was being an idiot.

“You weren’t in Transfiguration.”

Severus sneered, though he didn’t look up. "What of it?"

Harry shrugged, helpless to Severus’s irritation. He knew it wasn’t his fault, but Severus the teenager was just as moody as Snape the adult, maybe even worse. "Do you want a look at my notes?"

Finally Severus looked up at him. He didn’t seem particularly upset, just irritated, and that was a fairly standard expression to find on his face. Maybe he had gotten over Lily...?

"Give them here, then," the Slytherin said after a moment.

Harry slid into the seat across from Severus and dug in his bag for his Transfiguration journal. He found the most recent page and passed it over, hoping that it was legible and at least somewhat comprehensive. If Severus wanted to copy them down, he’d have an excuse to hang around for a while, and that would give him time to think of a plan to broach the topic of Lily and James...

Severus picked up the book and looked down at them. After a few moments, he glanced up at Harry, then down again, the pinching in his brow transforming into something like confusion. "What does this even—One banana, one apple, a handful of plums—were you in transfiguration, or thinking about lunch?"

“What?” asked Harry, grabbing the book from Severus’s hands. Sure enough, that was what was written, at the top of a page of calculations. It took him a moment to understand why. "Oh, we were talking about... Gamp’s first principle, exceptions, you know."

"And you got distracted recording McGonagall’s fruit salad recipe?"
Harry felt his ears burn. "Oh, lay off," he said. Now that he thought about it, maybe giving Severus his notes wasn't as good an idea as he had thought. When he was distracted, his note taking abilities were unpredictable, and he had barely paid attention to the lesson.

But Severus reached over and took the journal back, shaking his head. "Was there any homework assigned? Aside from the reading?"

"Listing six practical applications for transfiguring food, and potential risks," Harry said. "Gamp's first—you can't create food from nothing, but you can change it. That's what the equations are for. Assessing limitations, and all."

It was a clumsy explanation, but Severus nodded, chewing the end of his quill thoughtfully as he scanned Harry's writing. "All right," he said after a few minutes, passing the journal back and jotting something down on one of the pages he had strewn out in front of him. Harry took it, settling further into his seat.

"Are you going to potions?"

"Scared to be left all on your own?" The sneer was back.

"Yes," Harry said, going along with it. "You should have seen the practical in class—it was a nightmare. No one had any focus at all."

"Including you, if your fruit salad is anything to go by."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Potter transfigured half the class's samples in one go," he pressed on. "And I think Black about had a conniption, since he managed to create a cat instead of a mouse. I'm not even sure how he managed that; the values are all wrong."

"Black’s an idiot," Severus said, but he did look somewhat pleased. Harry decided not to mention his own failure.

"So are you going or not? I don’t want to blow anything up. And you’re probably the reason I’m passing at all."

"Indeed," Severus said. He fixed Harry with his black stare again, which ought to be unnerving, but at least Harry didn’t think it was a sign that he was about to get hexed. He hoped. "You know, our classmates have vied for my partnership in Potions for years."

"Please," said Harry. "You would kill half the class before letting them get anywhere near your cauldron."

"Exactly. One might think you, whom I so graciously to share in my competencies, owe me for my patience."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Are my transfiguration notes not enough to earn your continued patience, o gracious one?"

"I think that tripe counted against you, as it happens. Definitely lost a few brain cells reading through that."

"Then what would your excellency demand of this lowly peon?"

Severus smirked. "Oh, well, ‘demand’ is a harsh term. Just your attendance at a little gathering on Halloween."
Blinking, Harry tried to figure out how Halloween had anything to do with potions class. “A gathering?”

“Yes. I’m told to expect it will be an enjoyably social affair, although I will leave it to you to judge that.”

“And… what, exactly, is this gathering?”

“A meeting, at Malfoy Manor. I suppose you’ve never met the Malfoys, but they are… a rising powerhouse, in the political sphere.”

Harry sighed.

“And there you go again. You just had to ruin it.”

“Ruin what?”

“I thought you were just being facetious. Instead, you’re being an ass.”

Severus scowled. “It’s just a bloody rally, for Merlin’s sake,” he snapped, irritation returning. “So that you could actually understand what I am talking about, when we discuss politics.”

“It’s a recruitment event, isn’t it,” Harry said dully. He didn’t want to think about Severus getting more directly involved with what the Death Eaters were doing. Maybe in the future he’d turned on them—*maybe*—but he’d had to join them, first. It made Harry want to stand up from the table and leave.

“Hardly,” said Severus. “It’s networking, is what it is. Some of the most powerful people in Britain will be there. If you expect to be anyone in the world, those are the sorts of connections you need.”

“Which is why you scorn the social aspect.”

“I’ve had six years in Slytherin; you don’t think I’ve made my own connections?”

“Well, those are not the sorts of people I would want connected to me in any way, thanks.”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “Really? What do you know about them.”

“Enough,” said Harry. “I’ve read the papers. I know what your housemates are getting up to on Hogsmeade weekends. They’re not exactly subtle. I’ve told you before that I want no part in any of this political nonsense. I know enough to know that I’m better off staying away from any of this.”

“You don’t know anything! And it’s not about the people, really. The politics, the ideology—”

“Fine, then. Name a single reason why I would want anything to do with them.”

“You don’t care for muggles—”

“Don’t I?”

Severus sneered. “Don’t deny it. You’ve said your aunt and uncle were nightmares.”

Had he? He didn’t remember saying that, though he supposed he must have mentioned them, in all the time he and Severus had spent together. And the analysis wasn’t wrong—but he shook his head. “There’s, what, three billion of them out there? My relatives don’t stand in for the whole lot of them.”
“Regardless, my point stands. You’re a no-name with nothing to lose and a whole lot to gain. More than you could possibly imagine.”

“I can imagine a lot, thanks; you don’t need to insult me. And I can think of quite a bit I stand to lose.”

“Like what?”

“My life, perhaps?” Harry said sarcastically. “I’m a half-blood, remember? A muggle-raised one at that. Whatever comes out of this, I’m not going to be the one to benefit from it.”

“My father is a muggle,” said Severus. “It means nothing, so long as you’ve got the potential.”

Severus was a half-blood? That was news to Harry. He’d never heard of any other Snapes in the wizarding world, but since the man had been a Death Eater and a Slytherin and Harry never really knew much, he had always assumed… “I haven’t got potential, and I’m fine with that,” Harry said, keeping his tone as dour as he could manage. “You, you’re a potions genius. And anyone can see you’ve got a knack for the Dark Arts. Half the spells you’ve got scrawled in that book of yours are curses. Curses I’d wager no one else in the school knows.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Harrigan. You spent your summer doing research at Oxford, you great ass. You’re a bloody sixteen year old doing professional academic level research, as much as you try to pass it off as a casual hobby. Like it’s fucking gobstones or something.”

“Almost seventeen,” Harry retorted automatically, but he felt cold, and dropped his voice. “You haven’t told anyone about that, have you? About Oxford?”

Severus snorted. “Like I had to. If it was supposed to have been kept secret, it’s the worst kept secret since Potter and his lackeys’ asenine nicknames.”

Harry was undeterred. “You know what I mean. Mentioning it to anyone who might care. Politically.”

“And who exactly do you think I might have the ear of? Politically?”

“You have… friends, if I can call them that, in Slytherin. Friends with parents. With connections. Connections that you are relying on.”

“For someone who insists he is so politically uninclined, you have a fairly firm grasp on things.”

“For someone who is so intelligent, you can be really dense,” Harry hissed back. “For the last time, I am not interested in joining your little band of vigilantes or revolutionaries or whatever you want to call it!”

“You’re just being stubborn!”

“…is now a bad time?”

The two sixth years glanced to the end of the table, where a younger student was standing. He looked strangely familiar, with dark brown curls and concerned grey eyes, but Harry couldn’t place why. He turned back to Severus, and suddenly it was very apparent that they were both leaning in across the table and had been practically spitting in each other’s faces, and it must have looked like the beginning of a much different kind of fight to an outsider.

“We were just discussing Hallow’s Eve,” Severus said, shifting to sit upright.
Harry just rolled his eyes, leaning back himself.

“Oh, are you going to come? Father will be pleased. He wrote me to ask after you, you know.”

“Yes, I plan to be there. Would never miss it.”

“And you? I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve been introduced.”

“I don’t suppose you have,” Severus agreed. Harry raised an eyebrow; he was being considerably more polite in his speech to this boy than he had ever been to Harry. “Harry, this is Regulus Black. Reg, this is Dudley Harrigan.”

“Harry,” he corrected automatically, but he was staring. *This* was Sirius’s brother? He was so… polite. Meek looking. Where Sirius was an untamable, wild creature, Regulus was… a house pet. A well-groomed, long-haired, collar-bearing cat on a silk cushion.

“Oh, you’re the one who was at the Oxford Magical Research Library, right? Barty has mentioned you.”

“Nice to meet you,” Harry managed to stumble out, though he was too confused to say anything actually conversational. Crouch had spoken of him? That was odd. The only time they ever interacted was when Hector was tutoring the fifth years and tried to pull him into it. Even though they saw each other in Ancient Runes, he didn’t exactly speak to any of his younger classmates.

“So are you planning to come along? Father said the gathering is going to be a real thrill. Old Abraxas isn’t sparing any expense, you know, not with…” He leaned in a bit, softening his voice even as his smile grew a bit sharper. “… *him* coming to speak.”

Harry had a sinking feeling he knew exactly who ‘him’ referred to. Strangely, though, the mention of Voldemort didn’t strike the same dread in his heart as it used to. Instead he felt fear… for Severus, and even Regulus, who struck him as far too young to be in a room with the Dark Lord. Harry had seen the way Voldemort treated his underlings, at least in the nineties, in the visions and dreams that passed through his scar. Voldemort would never hesitate to cast a crucio on one of his own, and with Severus’s bleak attitude and sharp tongue, he seemed a prime target… Then again…

“*He* is going to be there?” Severus was saying, with no small amount of excitement contained within his voice.

“Yes. Father says he’s taking a more active role in recruitment these days.” Regulus smiled, but then cast a curious glance towards Harry. “Are you attending?”

“I don’t—I don’t think I exactly—”

“Harry here is convinced he doesn’t have potential,” Severus drawled.

“You’re the one who brought up potential,” Harry muttered darkly. “I… my views on politics are… not exactly…”

“Extant?”

“Confirmed.”

“I’m sure you would be welcome,” Regulus said. “After all, this is just a meeting. You know, to get a feel for things. It’s completely non-committal. And with *him* there, there’s probably going to be far more people than normal. I don’t mean to offend, but you probably won’t be noticed at all. If you’re
undecided on your stance, well, who better to learn about politics from than some of the foremost political figures of our time?"

Harry just gaped. How on earth could this be Sirius’s brother?

“Exactly what I have been telling him,” Severus said with an overly dramatic sigh. Harry shut his mouth to fix him with a glare. “Imagine, how Rowena Ravenclaw would cry if she knew that one of her own wasn’t even curious enough to learn about history in the making.”

That, at least, was a new argument, and caught Harry off guard. Apparently the two Slytherins took his confusion as a good sign, as Regulus was quick to follow up—“Oh, but I’m sure you wouldn’t deny such an opportunity, Harry? If it is the politics you are unconvinced about, divorce this whole affair from that.”

“What?” said Harry. “I thought it was a political rally?”

“Well, yes,” Regulus concurred, nodding. “Though rally is not precisely the term. But it is so much more than that, don’t you understand?”

“Oh, but he’s not a Slytherin, Reg,” Severus reminded.

“Shush, Sev, I’m sure even a Ravenclaw can understand the necessity of networking.” Regulus met Harry’s eyes indulgently, as though to say, That Severus! Always making assumptions!

“Networking is… not something I particularly care about,” said Harry. That, at least, was a completely honest statement. Perhaps the only one he had made all day.

For the first time, Regulus looked confused. “I… not to be indelicate, Harrigan, but…” He leaned in, glancing at Severus as though truly nervous. “You are expecting to get a job after Hogwarts, are you not?”

It took Harry a moment to understand why Regulus had asked it that way. If not for his recent friendship Pandora, whose extended family were largely traditional (if liberal) purebloods, he might not have understood at all. Among the wealthy pureblood elite, jobs were something to be considered shameful—excepting filling inherited Seats in the Wizengamot, of course. After all, if you were wealthy as all that you did not need to work, and so time was better spent on investments and avocations than things like careers, but family duty came first.

“Er, yes,” Harry said, squirming in his seat. “I suppose.”

“Then you will need to make the proper connections, of course,” Regulus said, easing back into a more comfortable, conversational tone. “Morgan forbid you are stuck with some menial task beneath you, when the right connections could get you on work with purpose.” He made a smooth gesture to incorporate Severus into his explanation. “Or, if you are more like Severus, you might find patrons, who will invest in your progress towards Mastery of an art, or recommend you for an apprenticeship.”

“I’m afraid Harry won’t be going into a potions apprenticeship any time soon,” Severus commented dryly. Regulus gave him a look—was it supposed to be chastising? He had such a childish face it was impossible to tell—and went on.

“The point remains, my friend. Networking. You can’t avoid it, even for one so reclusive as Severus.”

Harry nodded vaguely, though not because he cared about networking at all. He’d been known to far
more strangers than he had ever wanted to since his entrance into the wizarding world, so building more shallow connections had absolutely no appeal to him. But at the same time, the argument Regulus was presenting made sense… from a different angle.

Yes, the more he thought about it, the more it became clear. He may not be able to take up his wand and fight with the Order against Voldemort, but he could go and learn. A meeting like this, where the potential Death Eaters would be gathered, would be the perfect chance to size up the enemy.

For most of his early years at Hogwarts, his understanding of the war had been ‘Dumbledore good, Voldemort bad’, and while that was basically true, he was realizing it was so much more complicated than that. He’d never really thought much about how the ministry worked. He’d only been there once, and that was for an improperly done court appointment. Since arriving in the seventies, he’d actually had to pay attention to it, what with Pandora’s cousin and all the news excitement over the Wizengamot member who got killed and Severus and Hector both trying to explain what any of it meant. And even with that simplified understanding, he wasn’t at all sure how the politics he was slowly coming to terms with had anything to do with the Death Eaters.

So it was tempting to go, and to see who was involved, and maybe then he could begin to understand how it all fit together. There wasn’t the faintest chance that he would hear anything that would make him sympathize with them, but Harry was beginning to get the picture that the Death Eaters’ goals had to do with a lot more than blood purity. And maybe while he was there he would see the faces of other students, and he would know who to watch extra carefully in class. That way, when he returned to the nineties, he would have some idea of the forces they were facing. He wouldn’t be as useless as he had been, the year of his disappearance…

…it if he ever got back.

What if he never did? He’d spent the whole summer buried in research, and even in his current translation project (when he had the rare spare moment to pull out the journal and work on it) every time the author thought he was on the right track there was inevitably an entry a few days later announcing that his experiments had some fatal flaw preventing them from working. In one entry, he had bemoaned that it was as though time was working against him, as though it did not want him to find a way to travel it freely. Harry understood the sentiment.

If he couldn’t go on, what would he do? Would he continue to blend into the background, waiting until March of 1996 to get involved? Or would he let Dumbledore look into his past, fight to prevent the outcomes of the war at he knew them—to save his parents? And Neville’s? And Cedric…

And at that moment, a terrible, horrible thought dawned on Harry. He didn’t know that it was terrible and horrible, but that is not unusual among those who have terrible, horrible thoughts. In fact, on the surface, it seemed like a quite nice thought. The sort of thought that changes hopeless feelings to cautious optimism, which is generally a good-feeling sort of change.

What, Harry thought, if I could be a spy?

Now, as much as Harry had grown in the past year, he hadn’t really put much thought to the idea of spying, being much more concerned with matters such as time travel and the potential destruction of the universe as he knew it. And he was, of course, a sixteen year old, and prone to romanticization and over-simplification, which he sometimes noticed and occasionally even corrected. So when he thought ‘spy’, he didn’t quite think the whole of it through—at least, not at that moment, with pressure on him from his sarcastic acquaintance and this strangely charming newcomer. He didn’t think of danger or double-sided vilification or the high likelihood of becoming a martyr.

What he did think was of information, and he especially fancied the idea that he would be in control
of information, which in all the years of his life he had never once been. He hadn’t known that he was a wizard, he hadn’t known that he was famous—and he certainly hadn’t known what the Death Eaters had been up to in 1996, even though he was certain that the Order and Dumbledore and Snape had known a great deal. For a brief moment he thought there was no one to stop him from going and finding out exactly what was going on all on his own, and if he was going to be stuck in the past he might as well be doing something useful like finding out exactly what had gone on this first time around so that when he got back—

And then his train of thought stumbled. When he got back, what? It wasn’t as though the Order didn’t know what had happened. They had Snape, after all, and they’d seen mostly firsthand Voldemort had done. And it didn’t resolve the problem that he still didn’t know how to get back, so gathering that information might not help at all…

But the Order, especially Snape and Dumbledore, they didn’t tell him anything. And he might have understood that if he hadn’t been part of the fight from before he was born, since his parents had been killed by Voldemort himself and then he’d gotten stuck with the whole boy-who-lived business. He’d been at the headquarters for ages the summer before he’d left, and the only information he’d gotten had been from Sirius, and that hadn’t really been information so much as a vague myth for him to obsess over. ‘Something he didn’t have last time,’ Sirius had said—well if that was the case, then maybe if Harry had a better idea of what ‘last time’ was like, he could figure out what the ‘weapon’ was Sirius had been hinting that Voldemort would be trying to steal from the Department of Mysteries.

“He’s weakening,” Severus observed gleefully. Regulus shot him another cool glance, but beamed down at Harry when he turned back.

“All manner of people will be there. The ‘who’s who’ of Britain, you might say. I’d expect some of Lord Malfoy’s contacts from the mainland as well, but perhaps they will wait for the New Year’s gathering.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “This is a thing, then? Making political meetings out of holidays?”

“Do you find that strange?” Regulus asked. “Mostly non-religious holidays are either leftovers of traditions only a handful practice, or imports from the muggle world. If we are going to be granted them as free days of celebration, we might as well make use of them.”

“Don’t get off topic,” Severus warned. “And don’t explain too much, or he’ll get it in that head of his that he knows enough not to go.”

“Don’t be rude. I’m sure Harry can make up his own mind. Besides, I truly cannot capture what such an event will be. It is the beginnings of the future, Harry.”

Harry winced. Right. The future.

“There will be free food,” said Severus.

“For Merlin’s sake, Severus.” Regulus pressed his fingers into his temples, though he was experiencing physical pain at Severus’s unique sense of tact. “I can’t fathom…”

“You might not understand, Regulus, but we are two young men who are very, very broke.”

“You, at least, are a teenager, and not a man at all.”

“Then we are very hungry from all that growing, as your father would say, and still: very broke.”
“Me less than you, on all accounts. And there’s free food here,” Harry added wryly. “A whole feast of it.”

“You weren’t planning on going to the feast anyways, and this is being paid for by Abraxas Malfoy, mostly,” said Severus. “What better way to celebrate your birthday than fine dining?”

“Your birthday is on Hallow’s Eve?”

Harry glanced up at Regulus’s honest burst of curiosity. “Er, yeah.”

“How auspicious,” Regulus said, smiling even more candidly than before. “Is it?”

“It is. A fine day to be born, by the old traditions—a day of power and spiritual connection. Oh, you really must come—how old will you be turning?”

“Seventeen.” Severus’s smirk was really growing too twisted for his face as he spoke.

“No!”

“No… sorry?” Harry said.

“Sorry? No, no—I really must insist, Harrigan, that you come along. A Hallow’s Eve birthday—a seventeenth birthday nonetheless—there is really no better omen.”

“Omen,” Harry echoed. He had a dreadful image of Trelawny and her dramatic antics as she predicted his increasingly violent death come to mind at the word—though she had been the one to suffer Umbridge the worst, he realized, so he really ought to feel guilty at the thought.

“You know,” Severus drawled. “It’s the night for the living to walk with the dead. A baby born on Hallow’s Eve is thought to have a foot in Death already, and to know him more keenly than the rest of us. And we are the Death Eaters.”

“Severus!” Regulus exclaimed, looking around anxiously. Of course no one who wasn’t supposed to be part of it was listening—no one but Harry, he thought darkly. And they wanted him to hear. What better way to gather information than to be welcomed with a smile and his wand behind his back…

“You really shouldn’t say such things out loud,” Regulus said softly, leaning in. “And you’re not one of them, not yet.”

“Neither are you.”

“No, but I will be, and sooner than you,” Regulus vowed, but his eyes softened as he turned back to Harry. “Really though, Harry, what else will you be doing that night, if you’re not even attending the feast?”

“Nothing, I suppose.”

“That just won’t do. Not for your seventeenth. Not coming into your majority.”

“It’s just another birthday,” he said lightly.

“Just another birthday?” Regulus looked at him in disbelief for a moment, then shook his head. “Well, if you really think that—even though it is your majority, of all days—then even if you come away from the party having had the worst night of your life, then it won’t be that much of a
disappointment.”

Harry thought about that. “I suppose.”

“Then Harry, as one wizard to another, I simply must insist that you not spend your birthday locked away in the castle. As Severus said, there will be excellent food, and I’m sure other entertainment as well, but more important will be the people, and the speaking. I’m sure you’ll find it enjoyable.”

Harry sighed. When he put it like that, it seemed like they were talking about a silly, frivolous thing instead of a political rally of—how best to put it? Wizard Nazis. The thought made him nauseous. But if it was as trivial as Regulus made it sound (declarations of the ‘beginning of the future’ notwithstanding) then it would the perfect chance to get some basic understanding. To test the waters, so to speak, and see if this spying idea was actually worth it. “Alright,” he said at last. “If you say so, I’m sure I will.”

Severus grinned, and for a moment Harry considered taking it back just to spite him. He managed to hold his tongue, though, and looked politely up at Regulus.

“Father will be pleased,” Regulus said with a smile. “I’ll have him send an invitation along. You can arrange getting him there, Severus?”

“Of course,” Severus said in that ridiculous and gracious tone he’d started the conversation with, before abruptly changing the subject. “Now… potions, again?”

Regulus sighed. “I’m afraid that Professor Slughorn has found my performance to be worth only an ‘E’, which Father finds unsatisfactory.”

“October… you should be on poisons and antidotes?”

“Yes.”

“Harry struggled at the same thing.”

“Hey! I got things straight before OWLs, Thank You Very Much.”

“You’re welcome,” said Severus dryly. “Well, Reg, if you can convince Slughorn to allow us to use the lab, I am sure we could work through things on Saturday.”

“Thank you, Severus,” Regulus said, bowing slightly, an action which would have been awkward for anyone else but for the young Slytherin seemed a practiced and natural movement. He looked up to Harry. “You’re welcome to join us for that as well, of course; I don’t mean to hold monopoly on Severus.”

“Er,” said Harry.

“What he means to say is that he would be happy to join us,” Severus said.

Harry raised a brow—why on earth would Severus want him there? Unless he meant to team with Regulus to convince him—no, he’d already agreed to go to the meeting. Why had he agreed to go to the meeting?

“Well, I look forward to seeing you this Saturday, then,” Regulus said brightly. “Good afternoon, Severus.”

“Good afternoon.”
Harry stared as Regulus returned to the large central table of the library, where several other fifth years, including Crouch, were gathered. He tried to sort out if he recognized any more of them, future Death Eaters or teachers, but they just looked like regular kids. How many of them were going to this “meeting”? Sighing, he turned back to their table. What had he gotten himself into this time?

Severus was staring at him, the crease between his eyebrows deep with thought. “Shut up,” Harry huffed, grabbing for his book.

“I didn’t say anything,” Severus said, raising an eyebrow.

“You don’t have to be so smug,” Harry grumbled. “I’m only going so that you’ll shut up about it.”

“Oh, is that all?”

Harry stiffened. The thought that anyone would think he really want to be around a group of people as wrong as the Death Eaters… “So you’d be fine if I just don’t go, then? And you’d leave me alone? Because that would be a lot easier—”

“Merlin, Harrigan, don’t pitch a fit. You’ve already told Reg that you would come along, after all. Of course, he’ll ask you along to all the meetings after this. I’ll make sure of it.”

Harry took off his glasses and set them on the table, then massaged his eyes and the bridge of his nose. “One meeting, Sev,” he said dully. “That’s it. It’s one more than I should attend, in any case. Are you going to accept that, or should I just call Black back over to apologize for the confusion, as I will not be attending?”

“Stop being difficult,” Severus said. “You’ve agreed, and I intend to hold you to that.”

“You intended to hold me to it whether I agreed or not.”

“Beside the point.” The boy finally looked back to the homework spread out in front of him. “What were you really here for, in any case? I assume it wasn’t just to hand off those ‘notes’ of yours, abysmal as they were.”

Harry scoffed. For a moment he considered his previous plan of delaying until he could figure out a way to subtly check on Severus’s state of mind following the Lily-James fiasco, but now he was irritated enough that he tossed that approach aside. “Lily Evans did just ask out James Potter, and following that you ran off from class,” he said bluntly. “Merlin knows why, but I had thought it prudent to check on your well-being. Apparently a bad choice on my part.”

Snape’s good cheer evaporated as he spoke. Harry felt rather smug watching the Slytherin’s face tense up, considering he had just been coerced into a meeting where bloody Voldemort was going to be present—but he was doing this as a favor to Lily, so he probably shouldn’t take pleasure in Severus’s suddenly ill mood.

"And why, exactly, would I care about that?"

"Really, Severus?" Harry said. "Look, I know you think I am an idiot, but I'm not that much of one. Please don't act like I don't know that you two were..."

"Were what, exactly?" Severus said. His voice had gone low in a way that was probably dangerous, but Harry just rolled his eyes. This Severus could never be half as intimidating as his older self was.

"I dunno. Friends? At least, she thought you were, and you cared enough to—"
"Lily has made her choice," Severus cut him off. "How she could choose someone like James *fucking* Potter is beyond me, but frankly, I don't give a damn what she does anymore."

"Right," said Harry. He kept his voice in that same flat tone of sarcasm, knowing Severus would prefer it to, Merlin forbid, actually discussing things like 'feelings' and acknowledging that he had any, but at the same time, he couldn't help but wonder. "So... you aren't at all bothered by the fact that Lily, who once was the only person to defend you when Potter and Black literally had you by your ankles, has now very publically announced that she wouldn't mind going to Hogsmeade with Potter on the condition that he keeps his appearance less unruly? You don't mind even a little bit that she would willingly associate herself with the very Potter who has for years hexed you in the halls? That despite, apparently, having hated Potter as much as you, she is now turning her back—"

"Fuck off, Harrigan," Severus snapped, cutting his tirade. The exclamation earned them strange looks from everyone nearby, but when they looked over and found that it was Severus, they mostly shrugged and accepted the outburst as normal. He took several deep breaths, lowering his voice again. "And she wasn't the only one to defend me."

Harry opened his mouth, closed it, and blinked. "Okay..." he said, not really sure how to take that point. "Well, I'd certainly hope that if I were suddenly to become chummy with the Gryffindors, you would be at least somewhat insulted."

Severus snorted. "They don't like you any more then me."

"They dislike me less—that's not the point!"

Black eyes met Harry's in a level gaze. "What do you want me to say, Harrigan?" he asked darkly. "So you want me to cry about how horrible a betrayal this is? I could, you know. I could run around screaming if from the rooftops, I could spend another night sitting on Gryffindor's doorstep until Lily comes out to grace me with her words of contempt when I ask for her forgiveness—it's not worth it. It's her fucked up, asinine choice, and she has to bloody well live with it, but I? I can forget it."

Harry hadn't heard about Snape sitting on any doorsteps. He could imagine it, though—Severus was certainly stubborn, and while none of the Gryffindors would ever condescend to letting a Slytherin into the tower, it wasn't exactly difficult to figure out where a house's common room was, when you could just follow the flow of people. Why Severus had sat there... Well, he probably wasn't to know. He was prying too much.

"I don't think you will," Harry said softly.

"I would if you would let it die," Severus growled. He picked up his book, burying his nose in it, but he was angry enough that Harry doubted there would be any reading going on behind it.

"So... when you see them at Hogsmeade together, you're not going to get the urge to hex Potter for holding her hand?"

Severus's eye twitched.

"And if they become an item, get married, you won't show up at the wedding as the voice following 'speak now or forever'—"

"They won't get married," Severus said, balking. "Lily has a brain between her ears, unlike you."

Harry shrugged. "I'm just saying. I don't think you'll let it go that easily."

"So? What do you propose, oh master of understanding people so well? Shall I run down to the
Great Hall, fall at her feet, beg Lily—'Oh Please, Please! Don't marry James bloody Potter!'"

"I just think you should be honest with yourself."

"If it is to myself, then I suppose you will never know whether I am honest or waste my days away living an endless lie." 

"I suppose."

"And you have no suggestions of a course of action I should currently be taking? Weeping loudly notwithstanding?"

"...correct."

"Then back the fuck off, Harrigan," Severus said. "And leave me alone. Merlin knows I am stuck seeing more of you than any sane person could stand."

"Oh, so I can tell Black to forget about my invitation—"

"For the last time, no!"

~
As Severus had observed, he and Harry did end up seeing far more of each other than either was fully able to tolerate. Beyond their usual partnership in Potions, on Saturday Harry was pulled from the breakfast table by one unnervingly earnest Regulus Black (never mind the glares that earned them from Sirius the next table over) and ended up spending half the day in the lab with the Slytherin pair. Then he got tasked with Severus for a charms assignment, and when Severus realized that Harry hadn’t yet asked Flitwick permission to leave the castle for Halloween, Harry practically had his arm pulled from the socket in Severus's haste to resolve the matter, and on the way they were caught by Filch, who, needing no particularly compelling reason to assign detention, wasted their Tuesday evening cleaning the Trophy Room (a particularly insulting task now that Harry knew that the house elves were not only there to do it, but would have genuinely loved to take it on).

By Saturday the 30th, they were well enough sick of each other that though both were in the library for the better portion of the morning, neither spoke to each other at all. Regulus, on the other hand, spoke to both of them in his apparently usual sunny manner, and Harry was forced to confirm that they were, in fact, still going to the meeting together, no matter how terrible of an idea it was. After their chat, the pit of anxiety that was burning in his gut grew heavier, and Harry buried himself into his translation project, forced to admit that he had let it fall behind in the face of all his school work and self-education in Wizarding government.

When he exited the library to make his way down to the kitchen for lunch, Harry was still so focused in his work, caught in an internal debate between two alternate translations of a single sentence that were most likely not to make a huge difference either way, that he failed to notice he was being tailed until he was halfway to the kitchen. That was a particularly pathetic point to notice, because it also happened to be when Sirius Black grabbed him and pulled him into an empty classroom, throwing him against a wall and putting his wand to Harry's throat before Harry could quite figure out what had just happened.

"Whatever the fuck you think you're doing with my brother, Harrigan," Sirius growled, voice low, "It is going to stop. Now."

Harry, heart racing and head throbbing from where it had hit solidly against the stone walls, regarded his future godfather wearily. He loved Sirius, but since Harry had arrived here, they hadn’t had a single positive interaction. Even Snape was making a better impression, and he was dragging Harry off to a Death Eater meeting. And from the direction that wand was pointing, this encounter didn’t look to be headed anywhere good.

"Your... brother?"

"Don't play dumb. My brother, Regulus. I know you and Snivellus are planning something..."

"I thought you were emancipated."

Sirius jabbed his wand forward again, pressing it into Harry's throat like a knife, though Harry could tell that he wasn't pulling up magic for any spell just yet. Still, Sirius's magic was—angry, was the best way to explain it. It was trying to swell up in front of Harry just as Sirius was doing, trying to tower over him and make him feel small.
Even if it was Sirius, this was Sirius Black the teenager who had no regret after he hexed Severus, not Sirius Black his adult and... at least somewhat more controlled godfather. Besides, having someone's wand pressed into his body was not exactly a safe position to be in, no matter who it was. Slowly he manipulated his own wand into his hand, careful to keep Sirius's attention on his face.

"Okay, look," Harry said, calmly as he could manage. "One, Regulus approached me. I'm about ninety percent certain that he and Severus are trying to pull one over on me, and if anyone could use protection, I don't think it's him. Two, I'm pretty sure that Regulus wouldn't exactly appreciate his big brother threatening everyone he talks to—" Sirius’s eyes flashed as he opened his mouth, but Harry rushed on—"and seeing as he gets potions tutoring from Severus fairly regularly, it would be rather stupid for you to blame me for their interacting with each other, wouldn't it? Seeing as he wants not only to pass his OWL, but get a NEWT in it, and Severus's guidance is the best chance he's got. Three—would you back off? Merlin, Black, what do you think you're going to do? Hex me point blank? Leave me stuck in this classroom hexed and alone? Not very Gryffindor, are you?"

Sirius again began to open his mouth, but he seemed to think better of it and took a step back, his wand falling towards his stomach. Harry took a steady breath, taking his weight fully on his feet instead of the wall.

"Are we done here?" he asked when the pause went on longer than expected.

"No," Sirius growled. "I want to know exactly what you’re getting my brother into."

"I told you," Harry said. It was harder to keep his voice level now that he had a bit of space to move, but he did his best. “I have no plans of getting your brother into anything. He seems like a good kid, even if he’s…"

He paused. He probably shouldn’t give Sirius the idea that he was a Death Eater sympathizer. It was bad enough already that they were directly interacting like this—if Sirius had originally been doing anything important to the future at this point, it was potentially one of those things that could directly affect his childhood—but if Sirius thought he was a political enemy as well he would only fixate more…

“Even if he’s what?” Sirius demanded, the wand coming back up. “What has Snivellus pulled him into?"

Slowly, Harry pulled his left hand—the one not grasping at his wand—up to run through his hair, turning his face away but not far enough that he couldn’t see Sirius at the edge of his glasses. “Severus hasn’t pulled him into anything,” he said firmly. “As far as I can tell, Regulus invited him to a Halloween party, and they’ve been trying to get me to go.”

“What Halloween party?”

Harry shrugged. “Some fancy pureblood thing, I dunno. You’re more a part of that crowd then I am, I imagine…”

It was the wrong thing to say, and Sirius brought up his wand again with his magic swelling to use it, and Harry, pushing past the claustrophobia the other boy’s magic inspired, raised his own, a shield charm on his lips. Before either could cast, however, someone came running into the room and grabbed Sirius’s arm—James, Harry realized after half a beat, even though with his hair falling silkily towards his shoulders the back of his father’s head was practically unrecognizable.

“Padfoot!” James said harshly, pushing his friend away towards the desk. “What the hell are you doing? We talked about this!”
“That bastard is—*conspiring* with Snivellus to get my brother into trouble!”

James glanced over his shoulder at Harry, but seemed to have dismissed the accusation before he even did so. In fact, he more seemed to be giving Harry a once over for damage, and while his eyes lingered briefly on Harry’s wand, he looked back towards his friend. “Harrigan’s hardly going to get your brother into trouble, Sirius. He hangs around with Pandora Moone and Hector Smithe. *Smithe*, Sirius.”

“He hangs around Snivelly just as much!”

Sighing, James reached out and forced Sirius’s wand hand back down to his side. “You can’t threaten everyone who speaks to Reg. He’s going to make up his own mind, and you know it. Leave Harrigan alone.”

Though Sirius’s face was blocked by James’s body, for several seconds they seemed to be having some sort of silent conversation. Then Sirius pushed past, and even as James grabbed at his shoulder and Harry held his wand in defense, he snarled, “You stay away from my brother,” before he tore out of his friend’s grip and out into the hall.

After a few seconds of silence save for Harry’s blood drumming in his ears, James sighed again. “Alright, Harrigan?” he greeted at last, running his hand through his hair—only to find it smooth and grimacing at the foreign texture.

“Fine,” Harry said. He registered that he was still holding his wand up, and let it fall to his side, slipping it into the pocket of his robes but not yet letting go.

“Sorry about Sirius,” James said. His voice was strained, and he was side-eying Harry the same way Harry had been doing to Sirius not a two minutes before. “He’s a bit… overprotective of his younger brother, you know?”

Harry just nodded. It occurred to him that he’d never spoken to James alone before, and it was a markedly different experience from facing him with Sirius at his back. He seemed—calmer. More composed. Thinking instead of assuming—waiting for Harry to talk. Then again… recalling their strange discussion at the beginning of the quarter, maybe it wasn’t just their isolation, but that he actually was different from how he had been the year before. Lily certainly thought so, or she would have never have asked him out. Even if it had been an accident.

Curiosity got the best of him. “Why did you stop him?” he asked.

James tilted his head slightly. “Should I have left him to it?”

“It seems rather out of line for someone who I know has had no problems with hexing people in the past.”

Frowning, James looked around and quickly located a desk to lean up against, crossing his arms over his chest. “I made a point of telling you at the beginning of the year: Dumbledore was right.” He made a short sweep of one arm into the air, a jerky motion. “Out there, none of these little school tiffs are going to matter. When we have jobs, it’s not going to matter who was in what house, we’re still going to be coworkers. It’s… petty, to carry on like that.”

“Petty,” Harry echoed, heart sinking a bit. He had hoped—but apparently… “So you’re, what, clean off hexing people because it’s a waste of time, not because, you know, it’s a shitty thing to do?”

That warranted a quizzical look. “You know, I really can’t place you, Harrigan,” James commented. “You hang out with Hector Smithe, resident soapboxer of muggleborn rights, and Pandora Moone,
creature’s rights activist, and then you turn up with Snape and his lot of friends.”

Harry shrugged. He had never heard someone refer to Pandora as a “creature’s rights activist”, but he supposed it made sense following her childhood with elves. “I guess you wouldn’t understand that it’s possible to get on well enough with people with different beliefs than you.”

“Maybe if ‘different beliefs’ didn’t include people should be persecuted for how they are born—” James started, but he cut himself off with a shake of his head. “Look, Harrigan, I don’t mean to be… just, maybe you don’t understand it, being a transfer and all, but once we leave school? The Slytherins are going to join the wrong side of the war. And you’re not wrong, I have realized it is pointless to waste our hexes now. They’re not going to matter until we’re out there. I can see that, now.”

“Are you really trying to justify your previous behavior like that?"

“What?”

“We’re kids. Teenagers. Whatever. Just because there’s adults fighting and pretending that they’re not doesn’t mean that we do the same. We’re…” He reached for the right words, waiting just past the tip of his tongue. “Isolated. Protected, at Hogwarts, from all that. Hexing kids because they’re Slytherins isn’t something you can pretend is something you did for the war, it’s being a prat, and a bully. If you can’t see that…” He shook his head. “You’re even worse than I thought.”

James stared at him, then sighed, again, his chin drooping down towards his shoulders. Did he always sigh that much?

“Well, Remus says the same thing as you, you know,” the Gryffindor said, tugging at his hair again, even if it wouldn’t stand up. “I thought he’d never exactly… had the same opinion of Snape that Sirius and I do, I suppose, but he set me straight this summer.”

He fidgeted, shifting his weight and running his fingers along the edge of the desk, as though he couldn’t sit still, even as the spoke of such solemn things. Harry wondered if he was the same way.

“So they’re the angel and devil on your shoulders?”

James laughed, a breathy sound—not the laugh Harry would have expected. “You could say that. Sirius thinks we ought to be doubling our hexes, all things considered.”

That certainly sounded like Sirius. Of all of them, he was the most consistent between his teenage and adult years: quick to hex, temper, judge. “What about you?” Harry asked, pressing on. “Do you really think it’s just a matter of waiting?”

James met his eyes. The sounds of their classmates chattering in the hall seemed strangely distant, even though they were just inside the door, and the air seemed heavy, still. Harry could feel James’s magic so clearly: it was wrapped around itself like a ball of yarn, only the strands of it never stopped turning, as though even in dormancy it was hard at work setting up for the next plan, to be enacted with total confidence and purpose. Not overpowering like Dumbledore’s, or curiously prodding like Slughorn’s, but powerful in its own sense.

Was that what Harry’s magic was like? He could hardly know.

“Ah, what are we doing, talking about this,” James muttered, breaking the stillness of the moment. He pushed himself off the table, rolling forward on his feet, and fell into his lanky saunter for the door. “I’ll tell Sirius to leave you alone, Harrigan. You could try to stay out of his way, though.”
The next morning was Halloween. Harry was up early, escaping Hector’s usual steering to take breakfast in the Kitchen with Hani. She treated him to a full spread on the table she had set up next to his chair by the fire, and even brought out the plates reserved for the feasts (Master Harry is just using his plate early, is all) to complete the presentation. Several of the other elves, with names like Happy and Turnip and Tam, who he had come to know over the past year came to wish him Happy Birthday, and when he was done eating they even brought him a cake. Harry smiled and accepted it, not wanting to make the elves feel like they were doing anything wrong, but at the same time found himself subdued. Hani gave him a handkerchief undoubtedly cut from the same bronze cloth she wore—cloth he now recognized from the Ravenclaw bedsheets—and burst into tears when he admired the way she had embroidered ‘Harry’ into it, complete with calligraphic swirls. It wasn’t a proper monogram, she confided, but she didn’t think he’d want the initials of his alias.

He couldn’t help but sweep her into a hug at that. Hani, at least, understood him.

When it came time to find Hector and Pandora, he thanked the elves heartily but dragged his feet in the halls. He wasn’t exactly looking forward to going to Hogsmeade with them. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to go—on the contrary, Halloween in the village was always festive, and the two Ravenclaws were fast friends that made for enjoyable company. He’d always wanted to spend his birthday among friends, he just also had always imagined it would be Ron and Hermione. And while he was technically turning seventeen that day, based on the way he had changed not only years but also months in his time travel mishap, in his mind his birthday would always be the end of July, not the end of October.

Eventually, however, he had to face what he was avoiding, and he made his way up to Ravenclaw tower (If you have me, you want to share me. But if you share me, you no longer have me. What am I?) and found Hector and Pandora waiting in the common room.

"There you are," said Hector.

"Were you waiting on me?" asked Harry innocently, ducking when his dorm-mate made a playful swipe at him. "I'll just get my cloak, then."

He did, and wound a thick scarf around his neck, and they set off down towards the village. Unfortunately, they were halted by Professor McGonagall in the courtyard.

"Mr. Harrigan," she said sternly. "I'm afraid you do not have your form signed."

The three of them paused and glanced between each other. "I'm afraid I don't exactly have a guardian to sign my form, Professor," Harry said. "I mean, my relatives are... well, dead, and I've been staying here under Professor Dumbledore's guardianship, I think? Not entirely clear on that, really..."

"No form, no Hogsmeade," she said sternly.

Harry was confused. The Professor, while always a stickler for the rules, seemed to be particularly
irritable today. He wasn't sure what he could have done to offend her. Since he had come to Hogwarts, he had only interacted with her once outside of class—when she had taken him, Severus, James, and Sirius up to Dumbledore's office—and in class he made sure to keep up his general, unnoteworthy appearance. Now, however, she was glaring down at him from under her tartan cap, and it made Harry feel like he had done something wrong. The only problem was, he hadn't, as far as he knew.

"Professor," Pandora said, smiling. "Harry here is seventeen today, you do realize."

"And?" she said.

Pandora's smile dropped a bit. "And he... he's his own guardian. He's an adult."

"I'm afraid that's not how the rules work, Miss Moone," the Professor said sternly.

"Well, how do they work, then?" Hector demanded. "Harry's legally an adult! He can leave Hogwarts whenever he wants."

"And if he does, he will be leaving it for good, Mr. Smithe," she said coldly. "Now you and Miss Moone are free to go, but Mr. Harrigan, by the school rules, is to stay within the castle today."

She turned around and swept off to attend to a group of second years trying to sneak past her notice. The three sixth years stared after her, open-mouthed, and slowly turned to face each other. Though Harry had wanted to go with them, he was no stranger to this feeling... the feeling of being left behind while his friends got to go off and be normal kids, and, ironically enough, the feeling of McGonagall telling him no form, no Hogsmeade.

"What the hell did you do, Harry?" Hector asked before Harry could do anything.

"Nothing!" he insisted. "I don't know—honestly, I haven't talked to her at all outside of class, I don't know what's got into her."

"It's not what he's done," Pandora said. "No, for some reason she wants to keep you from going to Hogsmeade, Harry. But you can't give into that. After all, you promised."

"Promised?" Harry echoed, bemused. What had he promised? They had offered to take him to Hogsmeade for a butterbeer, and then he was going to... oh.

"Stuck, Harrigan?" a voice sneered.

Harry's jaw tensed, and he turned around, taking a steadying breath through his nose. "Really, Black?" he asked. Sirius, going to leave the castle with Remus and Pettigrew, was looking particularly smug. "What exactly are you trying to prove?"

"Nothing," the boy said, but his grin grew. "I don't need to prove anything. I know exactly what you are, and there's no way anyone decent would let someone like you just run around and cause trouble for the rest of us."

"Someone like who?" Hector demanded. He was going for his wand, but Harry grabbed his arm. "Let go, Harry! He's obviously—"

"He's not worth it, Hector," Harry said, but he felt something nasty brewing in his gut. Hadn't James' warning been enough? Apparently not. "See, Black has this unfortunately big head, and he thinks he knows everything about everyone, like he's some sort of moral paradigm instead of an aggressive—"
"Sirius, no!"

Remus had grabbed Sirius, though holding him back required much more effort than it took Harry to hold back Hector.

"Let go of me, Moony," Sirius snarled. "I told you, he's a bloody—"

"You want to say something Black?" Hector snapped back.

"Hector—"

"Harry, he's being deliberately—"

"Can't imagine how you could hang around with him, Smithe, not when he's—"

"Sirius, cut it out!"

"He's markedly more tolerable than you, Black—"

Sirius got his arm free and grabbed at his cloak. Harry stiffened, finding his own wand, and in doing so let go of Hector, and soon all three had their wands up, and—

"Is something the matter?"

They all paused, turning back towards the castle. It was Regulus Black, looking somehow as pleasant as ever, even as he stepped down the stairs into the courtyard in between the wands of angry upperclassmen.

"Reg," Sirius grunted. His wand fell a bit, as though he could not stand to keep it pointed at his own brother.

"Sirius," the younger Black said flatly. He turned to Harry and smiled, though it did not hide the sharp look in his eye. "Harry. Are you excited for this evening? I certainly am."

Sirius let out a strangled noise. "Reg, stay away from him, he's a—"

"Sirius, you're being rude," Regulus said loudly, though he didn't turn. "Harry, I apologize for poor Sirius's behavior. He's always been a bit of a wild one, you know. It's why he's been—" he dropped his voice dramatically —cut off from the family. A real shame, you know."

"I wasn't cut off, I left," Sirius snarled, but then he seemed to regain his focus. "Reg, listen, you don't want to go to that 'party' tonight, it's really a—"

"Don't presume to know what I do or do not want to do," Regulus snapped. He was cold, of a sudden, his pleasant demeanor dropping as he whirled around. "I'd remind you that I know my place, and I want my place, and I'm not you, Sirius. My loyalty is, and has always been, to my family. Not that you would understand that."

Sirius reeled back, but before he could open his mouth again, another voice interrupted them, this one high and somewhat squeaky. "What on Earth is going on here!"

They all looked back to the stairs and found Professor Flitwick pushing through the crowd of Regulus's friends. Harry, realizing he still had his wand up, dropped it quickly, and nudged Hector to do the same. "I, er, Professor," he began, but then Regulus turned and was smiling again.

"I'm sorry, Professor, there was a bit of a misunderstanding here. It's all been resolved, as you can
see."

Flitwick looked at the gathered group in disbelief, and Remus took the chance to grab Sirius and pull him along, out of the courtyard. Flitwick, meanwhile, turned his gaze on the three Ravenclaw students.

"Mr. Smithe?" he questioned in amazement. "Miss Moone?" After a moment's hesitation (and with much less disbelief) he added, "Mr. Harrigan?"

"Professor," Hector said quickly. "Black—er, Regulus Black, that is—he's right. There's been a great misunderstanding."

"Well, explain it, don't just say it is there," Flitwick urged.

"Well, you see—" Harry started.

"For some reason, Professor McGonagall's got it in her head that Harry shouldn't be allowed to go to Hogsmeade, Professor," said Hector. "And for some reason Black was the one to set her on that."

"He means Sirius, Professor," said Regulus with a tragic sigh. "He means well, I'm afraid. I may have... included Harry here in some plans of mine, this evening, for Hallow's Eve...?"

"Ah, yes," said Flitwick, but he remained skeptical of the whole situation. "Though I understood it was Mr. Snape who had invited Mr. Harrigan along?"

"It was the both of us. I'm afraid it is one of those events that Sirius would have been invited to, before..." Regulus trailed off.

Flitwick's stern countenance was beginning to slip, to Harry's amazement. Regulus seemed to have a way of breaking anyone's strong will. First Harry's, now the Head of Ravenclaw's... Harry briefly entertained the thought of putting Regulus up against the adult version of Snape, but the thought was pushed aside when Professor McGonagall reemerged into the courtyard.

"Mr. Harrigan!" she snapped. "I specifically told you no, and you are still—"

"Minerva," Flitwick said in surprise.

She halted. "Filius."

"Is there a problem here?"

McGonagall frowned, and shot one of her most withering glares into the crowd that had begun to gather around the edges of the courtyard. The uninvolved students quickly hurried on, and the Transfiguration Professor moved closer.

"I'm afraid that Mr. Harrigan here is not able to attend Hogsmeade, Filius, as by school policy."

"What policy is that?" Flitwick asked.

"Why, he does not have his form signed, Filius. I would expect you to know that, seeing as you are his Head of House."

Flitwick tilted his head. "Minerva, don't be ridiculous. We've made exceptions in the past for students in Mr. Harrigan's position, without guardians..."

"Not when there is already a war going on!" she hissed back. "There's enough trouble as it is,
without Mr. Harrigan here running off to..."

"Running off to enjoy a butterbeer for his seventeenth, Professor?" Hector asked. Harry elbowed him.

"Rules are rules, Mr. Smithe," she said coldly. "You are welcome to remain in the castle and celebrate with him here."

"Professors," Regulus said. "I hate to interrupt, but Harry's already been given permission to leave the castle today."

"Oh, yes!" said Flitwick. "Minerva. The boy is on the list to spend Hallow's Eve out."

She stilled—and Harry frowned. Yes, apparently that was what had put her in such a state of indignation. Sirius must have found out that the 'Hallow's Eve Party' was to be a Death Eater meeting, and let McGonagall know.

"Mr. Harrigan, you were muggle-raised," she said coolly. "I doubt you have any traditions to be upholding."

"...muggle-raised, but curious about my heritage," he offered, catching the thread. "I'm afraid I've been kept rather sheltered from the traditions of the Old Ways, and Regulus has been kind enough to invite me along."

"It hardly matters his traditions, he's already gotten permission," Hector grumbled.

McGonagall's cold look turned to Hector. "Mr. Smithe—"

"—is right," Flitwick cut her off. McGonagall looked at him, surprised. With him on the top step and her on the bottom, Flitwick was actually looking down at her, for once, and he had a peculiar look of determination that Harry had never seen before. "I have given him permission, and as Head of House, I am a suitable stand-in guardian to give permission for Mr. Harrigan to leave a bit early for a butterbeer." He paused, glancing at Harry. "Even if he weren't already turning seventeen. Happy Birthday, Mr. Harrigan. Many happy returns."

"Filius," McGonagall said sharply, taking a few steps up the stairs. "I have it on good word that this 'Hallow's Eve Celebration' is nothing more than—"

"Nothing more than the students' personal decision, and approved already." Flitwick looked at the students, who were all sort of gaping at him. "Well, run along, then!"

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry, and he grabbed Hector by the arm and pulled him towards the courtyard exit.

"Let go, Harry," Hector grumbled. "You don't need to hold me back, you know. You're not the only one willing to jump into a fight to protect people."

"Yes, very Gryffindor of you," Harry muttered, but he let go. He exchanged a glance with Pandora as Hector shrugged his cloak back into a more natural position and put away his wand.

"He means well," she said. "McGonagall did too."

"I know." Harry grimaced. In any other circumstance, he thought it might have been him who had gone to her, to report that students were going off to be recruited by Voldemort. Time sure had a way of changing things...
Maybe he shouldn't go. He hadn't wanted to, and it was dangerous, and it gave people like McGonagall the impression that he was a blood purist or something. Even Flitwick was bound to think that now, even though he had been adamant that it was Harry's choice. If it got back to Dumbledore... what was he thinking, the headmaster probably already knew—

"Harry!"

Harry turned back to find Regulus, complete with his fifth-year friends (including Crouch, he noted), hurrying to catch up with them.

"I'm sorry about that," the Slytherin boy stressed. "Really, Sirius can be a little..."

"Er, he's not your responsibility," Harry said awkwardly. "I don't think anyone could control him, really, so don't worry about it."

"But I do," Regulus stressed. "And I hope this hasn't swayed you from your plans to join us this evening?"

Harry winced. "Of course not," he said. "I did, uh, promise Severus, and all."

"Excellent!" Regulus beamed up at him. "I will look for you this evening."

"Right..."

The fourth years hurried off, and Harry sighed, scratching the back of his neck. That had gone swimmingly. Now he was even more stuck with his choice then before.

"We're late," Pandora noted, and she grabbed Harry's other arm, fitting hers elegantly through the crook of his elbow. "Come now, Harry. It won't do for your first act as an adult to be late."

It wasn't until they were nearly at the village that Harry realized she had said something strange—what could they be late to; it was a meeting of the three of them—but then he was distracted by the wards and had to focus on the curious touch of her magic against his arm in order to keep his head at all. Hector and Pandora chatted lazily on about something, apparently not even noticing as Harry took deep meditative breaths.

Pandora's magic was like water, in a way. It had a similar sort of curiosity to Slughorn's and Dumbledore’s, reaching out for things around it, but it was more restrained, and like water in the way it slipped through the air and seemed to dissipate into a gentle mist around her, so it was hard to tell where it really began or ended. On his other side was Hector, sharp and focused. Harry kept his attention firmly on them as they entered the village with it's bustling main street, students, villagers, and tourists alike gawking at the Halloween decorations. Enchanted pumpkins danced about on little stocking-clad legs. Ghosts normally hidden in the village sat proudly on the roofs like ghastly gargoyles. Live bats, undeterred by the daylight hours, swooped down into the mass, forcing people to duck rather than risk getting wings tangled in their hair. Several of the villagers had donned masks that hunched their backs like hags, and there were even a few actual hags, who seemed to delight in the chance to scare children without offending their neighbors. There were even extra tables set up, selling caramel popcorn balls crawling with candy bugs. It was lively and amazing, but Harry was relieved when they finally made it to the Three Broomsticks and out of the crowds.

Chilly and busy as it was outside, it was no surprise to find the pub packed. Hector and Pandora were undeterred, and pulled Harry across the room and towards the steps that led upstairs.

"What are you guys—"
"Shush," said Hector. "You'll see..."

Harry had never been upstairs at the Three Broomsticks before. He knew it was an inn, but there had never been any reason for him to take a room, or for anyone he knew to. Still, he could feel that there were several people gathered up here as well, so maybe there was another sitting area?

He wasn't far off. Pandora led him along to a level that wrapped around the main room, open in the center to look down onto the main floor with a railing festively decorated with spiders webs.

"SURPRISE!"

He jumped in alarm as the table beside the door, filled with people, came to life. He blinked, gaping for a moment—it was the study group. They laughed at him as Hector pushed him towards the table, falling into the seat left open at the end.

"Happy Birthday, Harry," Hector said, sitting on the end of the booth's round bench to Harry's left. Pandora took the seat on his right.

"You all—you guys—" he stammered.

"Well, yeah," said someone. The others burst into laughter again.

Harry, sourcing the voice, was surprised again. "Lily?" he said incredulously. "And... Potter?" His parents were sitting in the booth across from him, Lily with a grin and James looking put out.

"I'm just here because of Evans," James said defensively.

Lily elbowed him. "I wouldn't miss a birthday just because of a bet, of course," she said. "Though I promised we wouldn't be here for long, so maybe get some butterbeer up here?"

"I... don't know what to say," said Harry, as Hector jumped up to wave over the ledge again. "I've never had anyone..."

"See, that's why Hogwarts is the best," said one of the paired Hufflepuff boys—Finnegan Floyd. "I bet your small school didn't even have enough people for a proper party, or whatever."

"That'd be horrible," said his boyfriend, Thomas Kirk. "No parties. Ick."

"I mean," Harry said, still a bit dazed. "You guys didn't have to..."

"Of course we didn't have to," said Mary MacDonald, smiling gently at him. "But that just means we're here because we want to be, Harrigan."

"Except for Potter," said Cat Sanchez, earning another round of laughter when James sunk further into his seat.

Harry opened his mouth to thank them again, but there was suddenly a cake that was very much on fire right next to his head, and he nearly toppled into Pandora's lap trying to dodge away from it. Madame Rosmerta grinned down at him, and Harry blushed, his ears turning red. Ron had fancied the bartender in the nineties, but here she was twenty years younger and just as, well, buxom as ever.

"This would be the birthday boy, then," she said lightly, setting the cake down in front of them and waving her wand to the bottles of butterbeer and small plates bobbing along in the air behind her fell into place in front of each of the seats. "Well, get on then!"

The whole group burst into song—only, they were singing five different birthday songs, and it ended
with only Lily and Hector on the muggle one Harry was familiar with. Hector had to nudge him to blow out the candles.

The group sat together for at least an hour before the gathering began to break apart. Lily indulged James in leaving first, though her date had fallen comfortably into conversation once he'd had some butterbeer and forgotten to sulk. Since they had been sitting in the back of the booth, everyone had to get up, and about half the group excused themselves at the same time. The rest had another round of butterbeer. It was only when Pandora reminded Harry that he had people to meet that the Floyd and Kirk left.

"You know," he said to Pandora as Hector was up settling the tab. "I had these friends... their family names were Finnegan and Thomas. I've always found it funny that those two were also..."

She smiled and patted his arm. "You miss them, don't you," she said. "It must be hard to spend another birthday away."

Harry blinked. "Well, yeah," he said slowly. "But I mean, I'd almost forgotten about that, today. Thank you for that. I meant what I've said, I've never really..." He trailed off. He'd never had a birthday, not really. Molly Weasley had tried, at Grimmauld Place, but there'd been the trial at the ministry, and everything had seemed so impossibly dark that summer before he'd been sent back in time. He'd constantly been on edge, with Dumbledore and the Order keeping him in the dark and his dreams from Voldemort being more upsetting than comforting with the paltry information they provided. He wondered, idly, if it was the lack of sleep that had made him so angry, or the stress of seeing Cedric killed and Voldemort brought back to life, or the war, that had made him so upset. All of it, probably.

When he got back, he would have to apologize to all of them for how testy he had been. Just one thing in a list of many, he thought glumly.

"I'm sure you'll see them again before too much longer," Pandora said.

"I hope so," he said. But, he had to realize, it would also mean that he would lose them—Hector and Pandora and the people he had become accustomed to seeing on a day to day basis. The people he couldn't help but consider his friends. And even Severus—they would meet again, but it would definitely not be the same between them, not when he could hold a normal conversation with the Severus of the seventies while the older, Potions Master, Head of Slytherin, universally feared professor was more likely to assign him detention than exchange civil words. And he would be returning to a Sirius who cared for him—and no Regulus at all, he realized, since his godfather's younger brother was dead long before Harry had even met Sirius.

And his parents. Real as they were now, sitting across from him at that table, not even properly a couple yet, when he returned to the nineties they would be gone. He had argued with James, he’d even gotten a hug from Lily, but that sort of day to day interaction… it would be gone again before he knew it. And they would be dead, and him the Boy-Who-Lived.

Merlin. How would he face Sirius, when he went back? Not trying to save his parents—not trying to keep Sirius out of Azkaban—but he couldn’t. He couldn’t.
"What are you two brooding about?" Hector asked as he rejoined them and they made their way outside. "You were enjoying yourself just a minute ago."

"The future, and things lost," Pandora said.

Harry just nodded. She didn't know how right she was.

Hector, however, gave his friend a sharp look. "You didn't..."

"I'm off to Honeydukes," she said, brushing past his unfinished question. "I've got to get some chocolates sent off for my Father's upcoming celebration, you know. Harry, dear, do be careful coming back; the rain will be starting around nine this evening."

Harry glanced up at the cloudless sky in disbelief, but shrugged. "Thanks, Pandora," he said. "Happy Halloween."

"Many happy returns. Be safe!"

Hector waved her off as well. "Where are you meeting that Snape bloke?"

"South end of the street."

"I'll walk with you."

They set off, weaving their way through the crowd of students. Harry, unsettled by the dark turn to his thoughts, was pleased by the anonymity it provided, and the press of people meant that there wasn't much room for conversation until they escaped it, which was for the better because the overwhelming magic was winning against the gentle warmth of the butterbeer, and it made his head hurt.

At the south end of the street, Harry turned off to one of the side streets, which had a little roundabout where he was supposed to meet Severus. Hector, seeing that there was no one around, sat down on the curb of the roundabout, and Harry joined him.

"Thank you for arranging all that," he said after a moment.

Hector waved a hand dismissively. "It's the least we could do. Your seventeenth is supposed to be your most important birthday—after your eleventh, of course."

"I've never had a party like that, though," Harry said. "It was... fun."

"If a party isn't fun, it's a shitty party."

"True."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, breath freezing in the air as it snuck out around their scarves, Harry's black and Hector's blue and bronze. Harry's had come from the lost and found, recovered by Hani when she went searching for robes to fill out his wardrobe with. He had a Ravenclaw one like Hector’s as well, but is still felt traitorous to wear, since he was a Gryffindor at heart, only a Ravenclaw of convenience. Behind them, in the little garden filling the island they were seated on, the last dry leaves of an aspen tree rustled and clicked, and they could still hear the bustle of the main street, removed from it though they were.

"Harry," Hector said after a minute. "I know that you don't... Pandora says I shouldn't bother you about it anymore, and you always clam up when we talk politics but..." The boy sighed, and reached
up to pat down his still impeccably neat black hair. "Why are you going to this meeting?"

Harry blinked, and opened his mouth to lie—it was just a Hallow’s Eve thing—but then he caught himself and closed it again. Hector deserved better than that. He knew the truth, it seemed, and he had still defended Harry against Sirius's ham-handed attempts to reveal the nature of the 'celebration'. Harry didn't know whether to feel touched, or sad.

"I am going to stay as neutral as I can, Hector," he said softly. "I know you don’t like it, but I mean it: I have to be. But..." He took a deep breath, trying to be careful with his words. "I told you... that night with the storm? Everything I do has a consequence, and I can't afford to go against my stance. Not right now."

"Not right now," Hector repeated. "Then, someday...?"

"Someday I want to be able to fight, as fiercely as you do. But there's not much I can do at the moment."

Hector studied him, the golden flecks in his eyes catching the light and seeming to illuminate as he tried to stitch together Harry's hints. "I just... you aren’t planning to join... them, are you?" he asked, voice strained. "Of course you have to make up your own mind, like Flitwick said, but Harry... They're killing people. Literally killing people. The head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes—that was no accident. Pandora's cousin was no accident. He was murdered."

"I know." Harry swallowed again, but his mouth felt dry. "I don't want to be a part of that," he admitted, but he was quick to follow it up: "I don't want to be a part of any of it. Not right now."

It wasn't a lie, exactly. Well, he did want to be a part of the force resisting Voldemort's growing forces, but he couldn't, he absolutely couldn't.

"So why go at all?"

Picking at a stray thread on the cuff of his robes, Harry worried his bottom lip. This was Hector, he told himself. He'd never heard of a Hector Smithe, in the nineties. He could afford a little bit of leniency... right?

Yes, he decided. Hector deserved it.

"Information."

"What?"

Harry looked his friend firmly in the eye. "When I do get involved, I don't want to come in ignorant. I've had enough in my life with being kept in the dark. I want to know things—which their motivations are. Who would join such a group. I don't want to make things worse not knowing what I'm getting into."

Hector's brow pinched, his mouth hanging slightly open. "You," he started, but he didn't seem to know how to finish that sentence, and then they were interrupted when another figure entered their view.

"Harrigan," Severus called. He seemed to hesitate when he saw Hector, but Harry stood up and offered his friend a hand.

"Is it time to go?" he asked.
"Yes."

Hector was still fixing him with that strange, studious look, but he at least tried to shrug it off. "Well, remember what Pandora said," he said, and paused a beat too long. "Watch out for rain."

Be safe, he meant.

Harry nodded. "Have fun at the feast."

Severus watched Hector go, but Harry couldn't discern what he thought of the other Ravenclaw from the expression on his face. He'd never seen the two of them interact, he realized. It was as though they were from two different sides to Hogwarts—one, where the Ravenclaws and the study group lived, and one where the Slytherin versus Gryffindor, Severus versus Marauders, Order versus Death Eaters battles raged.

"Regulus said you were held up," Severus said when Hector was out of sight.

Sirius Black thought it would be good revenge to tell McGonagall about this meeting."

"Revenge?" The black eyes regarding him turned sharp. Harry wondered if he was imagining the defensive edge—the one that seemed to be there for his sake. "For what?"

"For breathing the same air as you and his brother, I suppose. Black—Regulus, that is, set him straight," he said with a shrug, not wanting to get Severus involved in that conflict. No need to fan the flames of his animosity with the Gryffindors.

"Yes, I'm sure he did."

Harry didn't ask what that was supposed to mean; if Severus wanted to be vague, then Harry would let him be. Instead, he turned and looked around the three that filled the gaps of the roundabout's arterials. "Are we flooing through one of these? They look awfully empty."

"Next street over," was the response, and they set off, dry leaves crunching under their feet.

The house they entered was indistinguishable from the rest, save for the door left open and the smatterings of students headed inside. They were greeted by a nod from a witch with short lavender-colored hair reading a book while perched on a stool by the door. Severus brought out their invitations to show her: two cards of heavy cream-colored cardstock, details printed in gold ink, and signed by Orion Black. She did not seem particularly interested, just waving them on and returning to her book, but Severus, unlike Harry, was entirely unbothered. He led the way up a set of stairs, and they came into an open study, sophisticated in its dark wood furnishings, and filled with students waiting their turn at the floo.

"Oh look," one of those students called as they entered. "It's Snape. Again."

There were some chuckles, but Severus just smiled and moved towards the one who had spoken. "Malciber," he greeted in an equally sardonic tone. "And Avery. Headed to the Ministry to make your love official? To file the paperwork for your elopement—or were you planning a ceremony?"

Harry followed Severus silently. Seth Malciber and Reed Avery were seventh-year Slytherins, and worse, Death Eaters Harry knew from the nineties. These days, they were particularly well known for their inventive curses and their gift for placing the blood on other students' hands. He had never voiced his opinion of them to Severus, but of all the Slytherins the school had to offer, they were among the nastiest. Luckily, they had always been as disinterested in Harry as he was with them, even in the limited number of times they had approached Severus while they were together.
Until now, apparently. Avery, as though drawn to the way Harry tried to make himself invisible, leered at him. “And look what the kneazle’s dragged in, Seth. Snape’s gone and found himself another red-haired, green-eyed mudblood.”

“Watch out, Reed, he’ll be coming for you next,” Mulciber scoffed, glancing at Avery’s ginger hair.

“Me? I’ve too much class for his tastes.”

“Class,” Severus echoed dryly. “I’ve seen flobberworms with more class than you, Avery. Did you know, they eat their own shit, when it lands in front of them? Their faces are indistinguishable from their asses, after all. Rather like yours.”

“You would know all about beasts,” Avery sniffed. “Seeing as you halfway are one.”

“And speaking of class,” Severus went on, unphased. “I’ve heard you’re failing half yours, again. It must make your father proud, to routinely be reminded of his son’s illustrious future as a court janitor.”

For some reason, the banter made Mulciber chuckle, and he clasped Severus’s shoulder. “You’re always good for a laugh, Snape,” he said darkly, and turned his narrow eyes on Harry. “You’re coming along then? Smart lad, for a Ravenclaw.” He chuckled again, but it was an even more unpleasant sound, and when he leaned in Harry got a whiff of smoke on his robes. “Mind you don’t get lost, now. It’s a dangerous place for a mudblood to wander off alone.”

“He won’t be alone, Mulciber,” Severus said sharply. “And I’ve got ten curses you haven’t seen needing someone to play guinea pig. If you’d like to volunteer, it can be arranged.”

“Just a bit of fun,” the boy said, placating. He straightened up, but kept his eyes on Harry for an uncomfortably long moment, before finally breaking off. “Oh, Reed. Our turn.”

Avery, apparently less amused by the banter and sneering at Severus, was yanked off towards the fire. “Have fun, muds.”

“That was… pleasant,” Harry remarked when he and Severus had watched the floo die down. They were the last two in the room, though they heard voices down below. Severus rolled his eyes and stepped forward, reaching into his pocket to bring out a wooden snuff box decorated with a Celtic knot pattern.

“Mulciber is never pleasant, but he is useful,” the Slytherin informed him. He gestured for Harry to bring up his hand, and from the box tapped an unlikely handful of floo powder into Harry’s palm, then his own. “If you ever need to work with him, I recommend challenging him to a duel before he can spring one on you. If you’re fast enough to survive, that is.”

He tucked the snuffbox away and stepped into the fire but halted again, turning back. “Harry, just—”

He sighed. Was he nervous, Harry wondered? Had his house mates’ slurs reminded him that he was also unsafe in the company they were headed into? For the first time Harry was considering Severus’s safety, but Severus, typical Severus, seemed to push away his hesitation for that familiar sarcastic tone: “I’d keep my eyes open and my mouth shut, if I were you.”

“Encouraging,” Harry said dryly, even as he resolved to follow that advice, and follow it doubly since he knew Severus would not be worrying about himself. “Glad you’re not regretting asking me along.”

Severus opened his mouth again, but then there were footsteps on the stairs, so he hastened into the
floo, with it’s usual flare of magic. Harry, not wanting to wait to find out if these were more like Mulciber and Avery, quickly followed.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all! Thank you for your comments and support on the previous chapter, it is very encouraging to read. I realized I did not post what my intended schedule for this was. For December, there will a new chapter every weekend. For 2018, it will be every other week, as on the opposite weeks I'm going to be posting a few of the AU stories I've been promising. I've got the drafts of everything through March all ready for editing, and if there's any issues, then I will revert to posting this story weekly.

Happy holidays! Next week: the party!
Severus, luckily enough, was still standing in front of the fireplace when Harry came in, so Harry toppled into the boy’s back rather than out onto the floor as was his usual custom. It seemed that floo travel was even more uncomfortable now that he could sense the magic—he’d done it twice before, traveling between Hogwarts and Oxford then back, and he didn’t know how to properly describe the feeling. It was as though he was suddenly existing in several places at once, in every single one the connected fireplaces between his point A and point B and yet in none of them at all, and so there was both too much and too little magic at the same time, and while the fire itself did not burn him the magic seemed to.

Severus turned around, unimpressed, and Harry did his best to straighten up. He would have apologized, had his disoriented senses not been fully distracted by the room they had landed in: magic, visuals, and sounds all at once.

Malfory Manor was designed to make an impression from the moment you set foot inside. The room they had landed in was a drawing room, opulently furnished with cream colored sofas no one sat in and fine polished wooden tables nothing was placed upon. These matched the architecture: smooth columns of polished white marble were set in walls painted a deep purple and filled with painted portraits and landscapes set in gilded frames. The ceiling was an extra story high, slightly vaulted with a subtle curve that made it seem even taller than it was, and at one end of the room glass-doored shelves lined with no doubt priceless artifacts filled the whole wall.

As fine as it was, the drawing room was modest compared to what came next. Severus, not looking to repeat their run-in with the next floo traveler, grabbed Harry by the elbow and tugged him towards a set of double doors propped open to a well-lit hallway, lined with paintings Harry could scarcely analyze before they were out into the foyer.

The ceiling here was even taller, though it was half of a large arc, higher by at least two stories on the left than the right, and filled with three glistening glass chandelier. From Harry’s view, the right side of the room was clearly the front entrance of the house, the undoubtedly grand doorway just out of sight in an offset. Set into the wall to the left was a grand staircase spanning half the width of the room, shallow steps of white in three tiers, a fine carpet embroidered in green and gold molded to the geometry of the floor and spilling out to the ground level. It was as spacious at least as a platform at King’s Cross station and flooded with witches and wizards of all sorts. Regulus had mentioned that Abraxas would not be sparing any expense for the gathering—that had to be the case, since there were servers offering crystalline goblets of spiced elf wine and carrying plates of unidentifiable hors d’oeuvres. There were at least as many witches and wizards as filled the Great Hall for dinner each night, and the vast majority were adults done up in elegant robes and fashionable hats. Harry, in his school robes and cloak, felt underdressed, but then he could easily spot several other Hogwarts students dressed the same, so he supposed no one would truly mind.

Underneath the marble architecture and gilded accents, the rustling of silk trappings and clinking of crystal in fragile promises, there was a bitter edge, a discordant undertone. If sensing magic were to taste, it would taste like dark chocolate, unsweetened; if it were a sound it would be the harmony line of a low cello, untethered from its usual melody. It put the room into stark relief. The lights reflecting off the chandelier were too bright. The smell of alcohol seemed to fill his skull, forcing his brain out of the way to make space. He knew that logically, the conversations around him were happening in
Breathing as evenly as he could and grounding himself with Severus’s grip on his elbow, he reached out tentatively, trying to identify the source of the bitter magic. It proved difficult. Severus’s own magic had a touch of it, but he was familiar so Harry could push past it. He likewise was able to ignore most of the people around them—many of their magics seemed to be vying for his attention but this, this was larger. This was in the building itself, the way magic coursed through the walls at Hogwarts, though perhaps not so powerful. He followed it further, letting Severus guide him along through the crowd as his mind spread and stretched thinner. There was a number of spots where it was clustered. Rooms, Harry would imagine, upstairs, downstairs—one was clearly a library, with the familiar book spells laced deeply with the bitter threads. There was a particular book there—perhaps not even a book, but kept on the shelves—that seemed to have its hooks on Harry, and he tried to tug himself away, but couldn’t stop the curiosity, the urge to know it—

"Harry!"

Harry jumped as something hit his arm—Severus’s free hand, apparently. He winced at the sharp transition back into the physical senses he had temporarily overridden, blinking several times to try and get Severus's scowling face to exist only once in his vision.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Harry shrugged. "This is all very..."

"Gaudy?" Severus replied. He snickered. "Well while you were off in Avalon getting distracted by all the shiny gold lights, you missed me pointing out Regulus."

"Where?"

Severus jerked his head, and Harry, following the motion, found the younger Slytherin boy, just up the stairs from where the pair had stopped. Some time between when they had met in the courtyard and now, he had changed into fine black robes, glossy and matte threads interweaving in some sort of subtle pattern Harry couldn't quite make out from the distance. Regulus was standing next to the unmistakable form of Walpurga Black, his and Sirius's mother, who Harry knew from her hideous, verbally abusive portrait in the front hall of Grimmauld Place. She had one hand on her son's shoulder and the other arm linked with another man, who must have been Orion Black, if the aristocratic features he shared with his sons were anything to go by. The three were listening intently to another man, but he had his back to Harry.

"Who's that they're talking to?" Harry asked.

"That," said Severus with curiously neutral tone, "is Abraxas Malfoy."

Harry raised his eyebrows, looking closer. So that was their esteemed host? He certainly had the typical Malfoy bone-blond hair, and his robes seemed to match the white-gold-green decorations of the house. A moment later he turned to head off through a side door on the stairs, but for the moment Harry saw his face he was surprised. Draco and Lucius, the two Malfoys Harry had met, had always had a sort of youthfulness to their faces, or their skin, really, free from extra creases and blemishes. He couldn't imagine a Malfoy with even a spot of acne, after all. Abraxas, on the other hand, wore a face wizened beyond its years, liver spots and tired bags beneath his eyes and grey streaks falling from his temples. His close-trimmed beard did him no favors, either. It was such a severe contrast to the liveliness and elegance of the manor Harry could hardly comprehend him living here—then again, it was hard to comprehend anyone living in a place like this.
But his magic, Harry realized, matched haggard look. It was… failing. Like air in the lungs of a man atop a mountain, insufficient to fully supply him. What was the matter with—?

"I see you've spotted my father," a voice sounded behind him.

"Lucius," Severus said before Harry had even properly turned around. "I was looking for you."

Lucius Malfoy—and it was unmistakably Lucius Malfoy; Harry would have recognized him even without Severus's words—stood coolly behind them, his arms crossed over his chest. He had a carefully unimpressed expression on his face, but the grey eyes that seemed more prominent among purebloods were lit with warm interest as he regarded Severus.

"Were you?" he drawled. "Well, of course. I did invite you along. Before Orion did, I might add."

He was dressed, like Regulus, in fine dress robes, charcoal and black. It was an almost strange look, seeing as how flamboyant the manor was, but the subtle gold accents were much more tasteful than the overall Malfoy opulence at work here. His hair, as in the nineties, fell straight past his shoulders, and, as Harry had remembered, he had flawless skin.

"Abraxas went all out," Severus commented, waving his hand up towards the ceiling. "Undetectable Extension Charms?"

"They've been employed tastelessly. No sense of proportion; it throws off the whole aesthetic of the manor. And they're clearly not as undetectable as they are advertised, if you can tell."

"I've been here before."

"True." Lucius flicked his eyes over to Harry, taking in the mess of red hair, no doubt, and school robes. "You'd have to be the one called Harrigan, then."

Harry didn't ask how he knew. Either Severus had told him, or he had eyes and ears at Hogwarts Harry didn't want to think about. He couldn't be that much older than either of them, in his twenties, perhaps, but Harry knew better than to underestimate Lucius Malfoy. "I suppose that'd have to be me, yes," he answered tightly.

"Charming," said Lucius. "You really know how to pick them, Severus."

Severus rolled his eyes, as he had when Mulciber and Avery had started on them, but he gripped Harry's elbow a bit tighter. "You're one to talk. I've heard you've been working with Damien Crabbe, of all people."

"Old family friends," Lucius said loftily. "Even with, oh, all this," he gestured vaguely into the air, as Severus had a moment before, "Malfoys do remember their family friends." But he turned his glance back to Harry, undeterred by Severus's distractive techniques. "Speaking of family, I've never heard of yours."

"You wouldn't have," Harry agreed. Since the Harrigan's didn't exist, yes—but Lucius wouldn't know that. He would, however, know that Harry meant he got his name from muggles. He was the sort to be obsessed with knowing magical genealogy. Him and most of the people here, no doubt.

"Of course not. But I was wondering if you might fill me in on your mother's parentage? That is, after all, a mystery among even your closest peers, and I just have to solve mysteries."

Harry raised an eyebrow. If Lucius was looking to goad him into a fight with Severus, it wasn't going to work. "I'm afraid I couldn't say. My relatives never spoke of her."
"Really," Lucius said, unmoved.

Harry sighed. "She and my father passed when I was too young to remember. As you might imagine, it is not exactly comfortable for muggles to admit that there is a witch in the family, so it was always easier for them to pretend that there was not. Whatever name my mother might have had in our world, to them she simply became Mrs. John Harrigan."

“How very disturbing,” Lucius pleasantly. "They sound like perfectly vile people."

“They were, I suppose," Harry said, shrugging. "As much as anyone else."

Lucius's eyebrows went up again, but he pushed past that. "Severus, have you finished your research on that potion my father was asking you about?"

Severus's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Don't get hostile, darling. I have another project I'd like to talk you into, but if you're still held hostage to my father's whims..."

"You'll know when I'm done, I'm sure," Severus said dryly. "You can explain it to me then. I'm sure it will be as exciting as this one. Assuming you're going to pay me."

"You're no fun." Lucius sighed, clasping at his chest. "So indelicate, like your friend here. How is a wizard to live like this?"

"How indeed."

"Very well, then." Lucius turned to snag a goblet of wine from a passing server. "Aren't either of you going to drink?"

"I'm not of age, and it's a vile habit," Severus said shortly.

"You're not of age," Lucius echoed, laughing. "Like anyone cares! This is a party. And you, Harrigan? You're seventeen today, aren't you? We should drink to that."

Harry was having a hard time joining in the laughter—not because he agreed, but because Lucius had clearly had enough for all three of them already. Not that Harry had any reason to believe Lucius would be any less dangerous drunk, he was also just loose-lipped in the most ridiculous of ways. Honestly, he had to be pissed—why else would anyone call Severus darling?

"He's useless for company enough as it is," Severus grumbled.

"Oh, hush, you. Harrigan?"

"I agree with Severus—that it's a vile habit, I mean."

"And you two call yourselves British," Lucius sighed. “I suppose it is only suiting that you would have no humor, Harrigan, if you would condescend to entertain our brooding Severus."

“Thanks,” said Harry coolly.

Lucius glanced at him, but turned away a moment last, a move Harry could imagine him practicing in front of a mirror, to get his hair to fan out around him as it did. He took another generous sip of wine. "Very well, I will go find someone pleasant to spend my time around. Have you seen Seth?"

"Over by Mark Spencer."
The blond man hummed and sauntered away while Harry struggled to locate Mulciber in the crowd; it seemed rather a poor choice to have lost track of him. Before he could, however, Severus had yanked him away again, steering them to the far end of the foyer and stepping into a side hall, wider than the one they had come in through but more sparsely populated, and pulled him off to the side of the door. Harry, at least, was relieved to be free of the press of people.

"For Merlin's sake, Harrigan," Severus hissed between his teeth. "Are you a complete and utter idiot?"

"What?" asked Harry, startled.

"You can't just give people your life story like that. Not here. Not when your relatives were..."

"That's what's bothering you?" Harry said. "Really. It's not as though he didn't already know everything I said, which is, frankly, rather disturbing, considering I have no connection to him at all."

"You have me!" Severus snapped. "No, the point was, you were... waving it in his face. Like you were proud of it, even knowing where we are."

"I'm not ashamed of who I am, Sev. I'm not going to act like I am, either. It would be pointless and stupid." He pulled his arm out of Severus's tightening grip.

"It would be tactful, not that you have any tact. You're being rude."

"That's the cauldron calling the kettle black. You're not exactly playing posh yourself."

"I don't need to. I am among contemporaries, who find my personality... permissibly entertaining, for whatever reason. You are among strangers you need to impress."

"I don't need to do anything. Why should I? Clearly these are the sorts who put blood before character."

Severus's eyes narrowed. "Oh, and suddenly you care about that."

"Maybe I do!" Harry snapped. They had gotten closer to the library, and whatever was in there had its hooks in his attention again. It was like trying to shake an itch, and Severus's hissing was grating against his ears, and he didn't care for the company or anything about Malfoy Manor. "Considering, as you put it, I have the sort of blood they wouldn't want thrown in their faces, for fear the muggle might be catching."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, dropping his voice into a moan. "Now, of all times..."

"And what about you, are you safe here? With your father—"

"My father does not determine who I am." Severus's eyes flashed with derision. "Pull yourself together, Harrigan. You agreed to listen to what was going to be said here, didn't you?"

"I agreed to listen, but I don't have to agree with it."

"Oh, so your politically neutral spiel... what was that then, a joke?"

"Neutral means I don't side with anyone."

"It also means you aren't trying to make enemies, unless you have a death wish, trying to face groups that stand together all on your own!" Severus hissed. "And I'll have you know—"
He went on, but it was for not, because Harry didn't hear a single word after that. He was suddenly having a very hard time remembering that he needed to keep the strength in his legs. Beyond the hall, just outside the door at the far end, a magical force that eclipsed everything else in the Manor, the bitter magic from above and the crowd in the hall included, had blinked into existence. It was unlike anything Harry had ever felt before—no, it was like Dumbledore, when Harry had first been sent back in time, because now, too, there were spots appearing in his vision, spots that were spreading and tried to block the opening door—

A sudden hush fell over the hall. If Severus hadn't noticed and stopped moving his mouth, Harry would have assumed that it was the magic, pushing out his other senses, because this, this was something else, but Severus turned, like everyone else, to peer through the door...

A tall figure, pale with thick brown hair and loose black robes, sauntered through. Behind him was Abraxas and Orion Black and several others who ought to have commanded attention on their own, but that didn't matter, because that...

"That's him!" Severus breathed. "Mordred's hand, I thought he'd..."

Lord Voldemort had arrived.

The Dark Lord was in no hurry. He paused several times as he made his way towards the grand foyer, greeting this person or that. Harry, his heart running a mile a minute even as his feet were glued to the marble, swallowed, which was the best way he could remind himself to breathe, all things considering.

Voldemort—this Voldemort—looked almost human, and the thought alone was enough to terrify him. He wasn't smiling to the people he spoke to, precisely, but he had that face that Lucius had been demonstrating out in the foyer, a careful indifference that broke only in expressions of apparent indulgence. He didn't look precisely like the Tom Riddle Harry remembered from the Diary either, but that was because he was older—older than he looked, surely, because Riddle must have gone to school with Abraxas and Orion, and ahead of the pair of them he looked positively youthful. But there was something in the way he moved. It was like he was... gliding, beneath the flowing black robes, like a dementor...

Only, though Harry could scarcely move or even think of moving, in the face of all that awe-inspiring (terrifying) magic, he could recognize that man wasn't a dementor or even, truly, Voldemort—at least not Voldemort not as Harry knew him. The scar on Harry’s forehead, like the rest of him, remained cold and numb. The man’s magic, even though it was reaching out to Harry as much as he was unavoidably reaching out for it, dominated, but did not burn.

It was lucky, perhaps, that Harry had enough of his wits about him to realize this, because when he finally put that all together and managed to process that the scene had shifted, Voldemort was three-quarters of the way down the hall, moving their way. Harry's scar wasn't hurting, but that wasn't all that made Voldemort powerful against him, as the magic proved. With the last of his focus, he ran a bit of magic through his own mind: what little he had achieved by studying occlumency from Hermione's book, he could only hope it would not fail him now, and that Voldemort would pass him without a glance, as he had several others... they were just children in his eyes, of no use...

Fate, however, has ever had her hand in Harry's life. As Tom Riddle, already tired of this sociable posturing, made ready to pass into the enlarged main hall, in which he could see several hundred heads craning to get a look in his direction, his eyes fell upon two boys by the door. One (pale, lank, with greasy dark hair and an unattractive countenance) he had seen before. A half-blood of some
talent, a pet of some amusement to Abraxas's son. The other, a good head shorter than the first, had the traits of a classical witch: red hair, green eyes, and a certain wide-eyed gape in the face of the unrestrained magic of a Dark Lord. Riddle laughed, a soft huff, and stepped closer in his plan to pass through the doors—the boy was the image of terror, and that rarely failed to amuse him—so he was within arm’s reach when something else caught his eye.

"That," he said, almost absently, as time seemed to stop, "Is a curse scar."

Harry could only hold his breath and hope—pray, not that he had before—as Lord Voldemort reached out to brush his fringe from his forehead at trace the straightened line of his scar with his forefinger. After that, everything went blank. No pain, no sound, just the magic, and the echo of a memory—*I can touch you now* —and his lungs struggling to remind his brain that it had to keep breathing—

—and a hand, pulling him, stumbling off through the wall, down a narrow hall, a servant's corridor, and into the loo—

"Harrigan," he heard a voice. "Harry! For Merlin's sake—*aguamenti*!"

Another flare of magic, but this one familiar. Harry clung to it, following it. Severus. That was Severus. He knew Severus. Severus had magic too, magic that was bitter but not so enticing. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and focused on Severus, the way his magic flowed constantly through him, biding its time, waiting, pretending to be smaller than it was—

His cheek hurt. Had he done something to it? He opened his eyes, reaching up to touch it, surprised to find his face wet—and cold, he was cold, why as he—

"Harrigan!"

Harry blinked several times, until he could see Severus's pale face going in and out of focus in front of his eyes. "Did you slap me?"

Severus groaned, but it was a sound of relief, somehow, and he sunk back against the sink for a moment. Harry looked down at his hand, wet, and thought if this was the loo, there was a mirror—yes, over Severus's shoulder—

"Truly atrocious," the Mirror said sniffing.

"Why am I wet?" Harry asked.

Severus sighed and stood back up, pointing his wand at Harry, and a drying charm was quick to his lips. He liked the feeling of that, warm and comforting magic, unlike Voldemort—

He could feel him, there, a few hundred meters away, it was only a few walls between them—

"I am beginning to think that bringing you along was a terrible mistake."

Harry snorted, and pulled himself forcibly away from that magic. Voldemort couldn't have him. "Now you realize."

His hair, in the mirror, was a particularly large poof after the drying charm, and the Mirror remarked that it was even worse than before, which struck Harry as funny, for some reason, but before Harry could reach up and flatten it down he was grabbed by the shoulders and turned to meet his companion's dark gaze.
"What was that, Harrigan?" Severus demanded.

"What?"

"Don't be an ass. Everything. All of... that. Why did you go all—all weird? In front of the Dark Lord himself—You're lucky he was in a hurry—What is so interesting about that scar?"

"Yes, I suppose I am lucky," Harry said, slapping Severus's hand away from his forehead. He'd had enough with people poking and prodding at him. "He's..."

"He's the most powerful wizard in Britain, is what he is," Severus finished, his words tumbling out uncharacteristically quickly, cheeks flushed with excitement. "I don't see why he'd be interested in you. You're... an acceptable wizard, I suppose, or you wouldn't... but... Did he really just grab your face like that? I don't know whether you should be honored or sticking charmed to the next portkey out of the country. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Harry said. He rubbed at his temples—it might not have been the same as when his scar burned, but running into Voldemort's magic like that had given him a nasty headache. If he had been recognized, he wouldn't have been able to do anything. "You're right. This was a mistake. I shouldn't have come."

"Stop trying to change the subject. Explain what just happened. Now!"

Instead, Harry turned on the sink and wet his hands, running them through his hair, trying to flatten it down in front of his face. "I don't know," he answered flatly. "I've never run into anyone like that—maybe Dumbledore would be, but he doesn't go around letting his magic go unrestrained. No like that."

"His magic?" Severus echoed. "Well, he is the most powerful—did he use magic on you? Are you—" He recoiled back several steps.

"He didn't do anything, Sev," Harry sighed, giving up on his hair and scrubbing at his eyes. "He didn't have to. That much magic... it's stifling. How could anyone stand there and talk to him normally..."

Severus's black eyes were fixed on him, his brow furrowed deeply. "Are you saying... you could... feel it?" he asked, haltingly. "You could feel the Dark Lord's magic?"

Harry looked at him in through the mirror, and his blood ran cold. He could see in Severus's face disbelief, and something like pain, through the confusion. Was this to be another case of parseltongue after all? He shouldn't have let that slip... he turned to cover it up with some bland lie, but then the door opened and his hand flew to his wand instead—

"There you are," said Regulus, sounding quite put out. "Father said you went running off through a servant's passage, Severus. I had to ask a house elf where to find you."

"Regulus," Severus said. He glanced at Harry. "Harry's just..."

But the boy didn't seem to need an explanation. "The Dark Lord can be rather overwhelming. Father said he addressed you directly, Harrigan? I'm sorry. There was no way we would have expected that, or we would have warned you." He smiled, a portrayal of sympathy, but there was that gleam in his eye again...

"I just—I don't like crowds," Harry said quickly, his tongue flying over the lie. "Everyone was looking at him, and he was right in front of me... I panicked. Like an idiot." He sighed, slumping. "I
thought Hogwarts was helping me get rid of that, but..."

"Is that why you don’t eat dinner in the hall?"

Harry looked up, surprised that Regulus had noticed that. What was with all these Slytherins knowing everything about his life? “Er, yeah,” he said. “I can do breakfast, but dinner… That’s too much.”

Regulus frowned. “Well, that in mind it feels cruel to say it, but they’re calling everyone up to the ballroom. The Dark Lord is going to speak. You won’t want to miss it.”

They were both looking pointedly at Harry, and he felt his ears burn with embarrassment. “We can stay in the back. I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so,” said Regulus skeptically. He glanced over to Severus. “I have to go join my mother. We are walking the halloways after this, so I don’t expect I’ll see you until tomorrow, Severus.”

“Alright. Have a good evening.”

“You as well.”

Regulus glanced once more between them, lingering for a moment with his eyes on Harry, and then left, the door swinging shut behind him.

Severus whirled on Harry. “Don’t like crowds?”

“Shut up. I really don’t.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“I—”

“Don’t waste your breath lying to me. You’re going to explain, in great detail, as soon as we get back to Hogwarts.” His tone warranted no argument, so Harry just nodded, weakly, and was relieved to see Severus relax a bit. “Now. If we go in there, are you going to blank out like that again?”

Harry flinched, fidgeting his fingers. “I’ve never seen anything like… like him, before,” he repeated, all too aware that it made him sound like he was whining. “I think I—we’ll stay in the back.”

“Harry, for pity’s sake, just answer me plainly.”

Harry looked up again. He’d never seen Severus look so openly worried before. It made him seem vulnerable, and the thought of Severus as vulnerable was just wrong. Even when he had been victim to James’ curse, literally defenseless and strung up by his ankle in the air, he hadn’t seemed vulnerable, and Harry swallowed. He didn’t consider Severus a friend exactly; didn’t think that he ever could, considering their convergent future in the 90s. But Harry did not wish to cause him undue anxiety.

“I’ll be fine,” he said more firmly. “I might… miss out on bits of the speeches or whatever, if he’s… but you can explain it later. I know you were looking forward to all of this, and I’ll do my best not to make more of a mess of it.”

Severus narrowed his eyes, despite, or perhaps in spite of, Harry’s assurances. “Are you actually fine?”
Harry smiled, turning to open the door. “We should hurry, or you’ll miss it.”

“This was supposed to be about you, not me,” Severus grumbled, but he followed Harry into the hall and redirected him in the proper direction.

“We can both agree that this night has become way too much about me.”

“About you getting a political experience, you prat.”

“Well, it’s been some sort of experience.”

They emerged out through the same patch of wall that Severus had led them through. The side hallway was empty, but there were still a few lingering on the steps up to the ballroom. Severus led the way inside, finding them seats in the last row, as close to the door as were available.

The ballroom was, predictably, just as splendid as the foyer outside. It was an impossibly large octagonal room; there were at least five hundred witches and wizards gathered inside under the dome of the glass roof, each in their own elegant wooden chair, splayed out in an arc centered around a stage. Severus had mentioned extension charms, and, yes, that was part of the bitter magic Harry could feel pushing the walls and stretching the grand wooden floor, but even now that he knew what it was it was a strangely slippery bit of magic. Every time he got close enough to get a sense of it, it seemed to slip away. He chased it about, because that was better than focusing on him, standing near the front of the room talking quietly to someone seated in the first row.

He nearly jumped when Severus grabbed his arm. “You’re doing it again!”

Harry blinked. “No, I’m not,” he whispered back. “I imagine I’d be a bit more of a brainless vegetable if I were.”

“You’re already a brainless vegetable,” Severus hissed. “I can’t deal with you being any worse than usual. Stay focused!”

“Right. Focusing, focusing…”

It was all very well that he was, because as they were whispering to each other, Voldemort turned to saunter onto the stage, each step rolling with magic. Severus turned back and made to let go of Harry’s arm, but Harry stopped him.

“Don’t. I can—it will help if you…”

Severus glanced down, face contorting with derision. “You want me to…”


Gnashing his teeth, Severus pulled Harry’s arm towards his seat, arranging them in a slightly awkward position that neither would normally sit in, Harry’s arm stiffly straight and Severus’s elbow peeking out of the gap between their chairs, but at least managing to maintain the contact between them. A good thing, too; as Voldemort stepped onto the raised platform he cast something on his voice—a sonorus of sorts, only it wasn’t that his voice was amplified louder, it simply… carried. He spoke at a normal speaking volume, if somewhat softly, but everyone could hear him as though they were standing a mere meter apart in a quiet room. Everyone, that is, except for Harry.

Harry could hear the voice, but it seemed more to be running through him, filling in his bones and his veins and his lungs. He couldn’t make out words; that would have required an extra level of
processing that he was not then equipped to handle, and the words themselves seemed unnecessary when his mind was straining to try and follow the voice back to the source of the magic. He clung to Severus for dear life, even if it was Severus doing the clinging as he noticed Harry shivering and his hand going pale.

Whatever he had expected to achieve in coming to this mission, whatever hope he had of using it as a chance to gather information, was thrown to the wayside. All Harry could do now was remind himself to breathe, hoping that he would retain enough of himself to keep his head.

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After what felt like hours, it was over. The ballroom was filled with applause and its numerous echoes, and to Harry, coming out of a stupor, it felt like it was shaking, hard enough the dome ceiling seemed like it had to collapse. If the beams supporting it ever gave way, however, Harry never found out: as soon as the crowd was on its feet, Severus pulled Harry out of his seat and fled out a side door to the ballroom, following a twisting hallway and practically running into the drawing room that they had entered the manor from, throwing down a handful of floo powder in the fireplace and pulling them both along to their next destination.

Wherever that was, Harry didn't come to his senses again until they were both standing in front of the doors to the Hogwarts courtyard, which opened to reveal Professor Slughorn, his red mustache twitching in surprise.

"Mr. Snape, Mr. Harrigan," he said cautiously. "You two boys are back early... Is something the matter?"

"Harrigan's ill, sir," said Severus, pulling Harry into the light streaming out from the courtyard. "It was the refreshments. He's just turned seventeen, sir, and you know how Lucius favors the elf wine..."

"Oh ho," said Slughorn, walrus mustache twitching. "Well, Mr. Harrigan? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Say for himself? Right. He had to say something... "...water?" he asked. His voice came out hoarse.

Severus jumped in surprise; clearly he hadn't expected to hear Harry actually say anything. How long had Harry been out of it? Certainly the whole trip from the village up to the castle, and the grounds around them were now dark, thick clouds blocking out the moon.

"Yes," Slughorn agreed, frowning again. "Yes, water and sleep, I should think. I would assign you detention, you know, for getting so indisposed, but I imagine the headache you will wake with tomorrow morning will be punishment enough."

"Yes, sir," Harry managed, weakly, but his reedy voice only raised more concern.

"Do you need to go to the infirmary, my boy?"

"I was just going to take him up to his dorm, sir," said Severus. "He just needs to sleep it off, I think."

"Yes, well... yes, I think you'd better had. Come in then, boys."
Once inside, Severus led the way up the stairs towards Ravenclaw tower, but when they got close, he turned on Harry. "We are going to talk now," he said firmly. "Whatever the hell happened, you are going to—"

"Not out here," Harry insisted. He pressed his hand to his temples. He hadn't had anything to drink—at least, he didn't think he had, and he trusted that Severus had more sense than to try and bring him out of it with a firewhiskey—but a headache pushing against his skull again.

Severus nodded and looked around, hoping for someplace to duck into, but it was Harry who led the way to the room they used for his study group. Someone had left their homework on the window ledge, but he doubted anyone would be by to collect it that night, so he shut the door.

"Well?" Severus demanded, finally letting go of Harry's arm. It felt like he'd had a grip there for hours; the absence of his hand left Harry's arm feeling oddly light, but it was a relief, in a way, to detangle from Severus's magic. To become himself again. In the ballroom and crowd, it had been a necessity to have someone to cling to, but now the release was a blessed escape. Harry took a deep breath, and regarded the dark-eyed Slytherin, wondering where to begin.

"Hani," he called softly when he made up his mind.

The house elf appeared with her customary soft pop, though with the pounding in Harry's head it felt more like the boom of a loud drum, and curtsied. "Is Master Harry needing—"

She stopped when she saw the state Harry was in, and briefly glanced towards Severus, her green eyes widening impossibly. "Is Master Harry being alright?" she asked softly.

"I'm fine," Harry said. "Or I will be. Do you remember that tea you got me, at Oxford, the one with honeysuckle and—"

"Hani is remembering."

"Could I trouble you for a pot of that? And a cup—two, I suppose."

"Is Master Harry not being careful with his magic?" Hani asked.

"I'll be fine, Hani, I'm just a little overworked. It's like the wards. Just a bit of a headache."

Hani glanced at Severus again, but nodded and disappeared. Severus was quick to snap, "Harry? What the bloody hell—"

"Severus," he hissed back, clenching his jaw as his head throbbed again. "Unless you have a headache potion tucked away in that cloak of yours, it's going to have to wait for tea."

Severus bit his tongue, though Harry could see it was costing him a good deal of patience. What did it matter? If Harry was going to tell him, he'd rather be able to think straight...

Hani returned a few minutes later, setting down a tray with a steaming pot of tea and two matching golden cups. She poured for each of them, and looked up at Harry quizzically, but he just shook his head, holding up the tea and taking a deep breath of the fragrant steam. It was a lovely tea, and safer for him to drink than a headache potion, when he was already bursting from an overexposure to magic from the evening. Hani popped a way, and for a few minutes there was only the sound of the beginnings of a rainstorm drumming gently against the glass. The pain in his head began to dull, back to a pleasant fatigue.

Severus, of course, broke the quiet. "You've got your bloody tea. Now explain."
Harry sighed, turning to perch on the windowsill next to the tea tray. "I don't know what you want me to say," he murmured. "He was... powerful. More powerful than I've seen—well, at least... he was flaunting it."

"Flaunting it?"

Tilting the cup around in his hand, Harry found a few leaves had ended up in his cup, and were swirling this way and that. It reminded him of his early lessons in Divination with Trelawny, when she had seen the grim in his teacup and so predicted his death. It was amusing now, he thought; he had seen the grim several times. He had actually almost bought into Trelawny's sham, but it had turned out to be Sirius, and their meeting hadn't led to his death but to introducing the closest thing he had to family. But here they were now, and Sirius...

"Harry?"

He looked up. Right. Voldemort. He frowned, searching for a way to explain.

"It's like a candle," he decided. "Normally, it only burns what it needs. A small, condensed flame. But he, he's like..."

"Like it all going up at once?"

"Like a forest before a fire."

Severus groaned. "Quit it with the bloody poetics, Shakespeare. Are you saying you can actually see magic?"

"No."

"Then what—"

"I can't 'see' it, because... it's not something you can see."

"But you can... sense it."

Harry nodded. Another sip of tea.

"Well? How?"

It was frustrating for Harry, to try to explain something like this. Could he explain color to a blind man, or music to the deaf? "I don't know how," he muttered. "It's the difference between a wizard and a muggle, a wand and an ordinary stick; you just know, and sort of, well, feel—"

"You can tell the difference between wizards and muggles?"

Harry blinked at having been cut off over that. "Well, yeah. It's not like that's hard." Severus's expression was getting peculiar, so Harry explained, not that he should have needed to: "We're so culturally divided, it's kind of hard not to notice. You should know that, you lived in—"

"If there were two people in a room, both identical in every visible way, would you be able to tell them apart?"

That required some consideration. "Probably, yeah."

"How?"
"Wizards use magic all the time."

Severus groaned again, but cut himself off in impatience. "If they weren't doing anything, would you —"

"It leaves traces," Harry clarified. "A residue, you could call it. Think, if someone smelled like the standard ingredient mix, you’d know they’d been making potions, or at least prepping. We use magic constantly—summoning our things, fixing our hair, checking the time..."

He trailed away as Severus nodded slowly, seeming to understand. The boy was considering him with those dark eyes slightly squinted, and for a moment it seemed he wasn't really looking at Harry at all, but then he focused again.

"That scar," he added to Harry’s list.

It was only the grip on his teacup that kept Harry's hand from flying up to brush his brow. It took him a moment to realize Severus expected an answer. "Apparently, yes," he said, hoping that would be enough to satisfy Severus's curiosity.

"Do you think the Dark Lord can sense like you do, too, then?" Severus asked, excitement creeping into his voice. Harry shuddered.

"I hope not." If Voldemort could, it made the scene earlier strangely—upsettingly—intimate. Harry would rather not have the thought of Voldemort of all people knowing him so closely.

"No," Severus said, only half paying attention to him as he spoke towards the cup of tea in his hands. "They wouldn't keep something like that—can you tell when someone is using polyjuice?"

"Dunno."

"Or under a spell?"

"To some extent."

"Can you teach me?"

Harry balked, shaking his head. "Even if I could, you wouldn't want me to."

"Wouldn't want—are you out of your mind?" Severus laughed, his eyes flashing. "Of course I would. A skill like that—you don't understand the political implications, no, the scientific implications, of—"

"It's not a skill. It's a curse."

Harry set his empty cup back down on the tray, bringing his hands to rest on his knees and staring at the backs of them. They were pale enough that he could see the veins blue against them, shaking, still, even after the tea and cleared away the worst of the headache. He swallowed clenching them into fists and opening them again before looking up.

"You don't get it. Every bit of magic there is, I sense it, and I can't stop. This room?" He waved a hand, gesturing about them. "There's spells on the windows, on the doors, that stone with the crack in it—there's spells filling the whole castle, running through the walls, like a ringing in my ear that I can never escape. Those papers? Homework from Flitwick, probably, because he's the only one to charm his to prevent cheating. And you—forget your magic, you've got your wand, and your potions in that pocket, some coins there charmed against counterfeiting. You've spelled your clothes, your
boots, whatever you've got around your neck—"

"Bloody brilliant," Severus whispered, cutting him off. "Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"It's not brilliant!" Harry caught himself nearly shouting, and he turned to pour himself another cup of tea. He needed it. "I can't stop it, Severus. You don't understand what it does to a person, to never be able to turn something like that off. If I'm not exhausted I lay awake at night, counting the people and ghosts in the castle, or the books in the library, or the owls upstairs, trying to untangle the mess of them. When classes are in session, there's spells flying everywhere, and I'm supposed to be focusing on my own work through that. Don't get me started on the first years—they have no control at all, it's like walking through a meat grinder when I get stuck in a swarm of them." He scowled at the liquid sloshing against his icy fingers, burning his skin. "And you've seen today what happens when I run into something beyond me. That crowd was bad enough, but someone like— someone like—"

He looked up and met Severus's eyes. He knew he was ranting, but at least Severus seemed to be taking his explanation seriously, for he had lost some of the enthusiasm, his shoulders sinking and jaw slack. "If I had made the wrong move, said the wrong thing," Harry whispered shortly. "If something had gone wrong? If I'd needed to defend myself? I wouldn't even have been able to raise my wand."

"You were rather useless," Severus agreed.

"Useless?" Harry laughed. "Useless? Severus, I could very easily have ended up dead." He took a sip of the new cup of tea, trying to keep his temper in check, and burnt the tip of his tongue. "I should have never agreed to go," he muttered darkly.

"Oh, come on. You weren’t in any real danger—"

"Shut up," Harry snapped. "You’re the reason I was there at all. Why didn’t you listen to me? I am neutral, Severus. Unshakably. I should never have let you put me into such a—"

"I didn’t put you into anything," Severus said firmly. "But it doesn’t matter, anyways. Harry, a gift like that? That could turn the tides of the war…"

"Haven’t you listened to me at all? It’s not a gift. It’s a nightmare."

"So you get a bit, what, overwhelmed? That’s nothing, I bet we can—"

"Nothing?" Nothing? Harry was getting well and truly angry by now. "You learned about this today, Sev. Please allow that I might possibly know more about it than you."

"Of course," Severus said, with a flippancy that Harry did not care for. "But you're biased."

"Oh, and you're not? You're failing to—"

"If I am, it's biased in a way opposing your own, and so the combination of our perspectives will form a more complete image." The way he looked at Harry, it was disgusting. Like he was some sort of experimental approach to a potion the boy was determined to make work, no matter how many times the cauldron blew up in his face. Harry glared at him until the glee slipped, and Severus sighed, coming over to put his teacup on the tray and lowering his voice a bit. "Really, Harry. You can't imagine the impact something like this could have..."

Again, Harry shuddered. Among the handful of things he had come to appreciate about the seventies, not being stared at for stupid things out of his control was among the most valued. He was
not going to have that thrown away, not when the lives of him and everyone he had grown up with were in ever increasing danger the more he influenced the world. "You can't tell anyone."

"But—"

"I mean it," Harry said flatly, firmly. "You have to swear not to tell anyone, anyone at all, or I swear to God I will obliviate you."

Severus scoffed. "You don't have the control for that sort of spell work."

"No," Harry agreed, meeting Severus’s eyes. "I don't."

The threat worked, and Severus pulled back, frowning, searching Harry's face for any sign of weakness in his resolve. There was none. Harry didn’t expect he would actually try to obliviate Severus himself, but he would go to Dumbledore and beg him, if he had to, to do it for him. Dumbledore understood the danger of anyone finding out too much about him, even if he was suspicious of Harry and his motives. And Dumbledore didn’t seem to care about Severus’s wellbeing at all.

"Fine," Severus agreed. "I won't tell anyone. For now."

"You won't tell anyone, ever, not without my permission."

"I can't promise that." He looked back at Harry with a firmness to match. "If it is as debilitating as you are convinced it is, then it may come down to a medical emergency—"

Harry cut him off. "Then you lie."

"Even if it would kill you?"

"If word got out, it would kill me," Harry said darkly. He believed that, well and truly, after the situation tonight. If people realized how easy it was to make him vulnerable, they would exploit it, hold it over his head, and if he refused to do as they said, it would be a matter of a few charms creatively employed to kill him. "One way or another."

"I refuse to swear to something like that," said Severus. "But I will endeavor to seek out alternatives ad absurdum before I let it slip."

Harry took a long, deep breath, and nodded. It was the best he could get out of Severus, and he really didn't have any desire to try and pursue the obliviatory route.

"But in return," Severus went on, relaxing a bit, "We are—"

"I don't owe you anything!" Harry said, voice rising in disbelief. "This is not your secret to sell."

"How honorably minded you are. It is not my secret to sell. Ha. Well, my silence is yours to be bought."

Severus laughed dryly as Harry bristled, although Harry didn't understand the humor. This whole affair was forcing him to trust someone he did not even consider a friend, and it was not something that Severus was making any easier.

"All I was going to say," the Slytherin went on, "Is that we are going to test it. If you haven't even determined whether or not you can tell if someone is under polyjuice, I can think of a hundred things at least you haven't tried. If you're so afraid of being vulnerable, don't you want to know the full
extent of what you can and cannot know from it?"

"I'd rather forget about it entirely, and have you forget about it too."

Severus rolled his eyes. "How about this, then: I intend to find the limits of what you can and cannot sense. By finding out what you cannot, you could analyze what blocks you from certain things, and exploit that to form a block against things you do not want to sense. A protection, of sorts."

Harry gazed at him levelly. His head was throbbing again, so he took another sip of tea.

"Well?"

"If I don't agree, you are going to find a way to experiment without my consent anyways, aren't you."

Severus's lips spread into something like a smile. "So you can learn, after all."

Harry sighed, drained his cup, and stood up, offering his hand. "My secret, your tests. Within reason."

Severus grasped it. "My tests, your secret," he agreed. "Within reason."

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Chapter End Notes

[Happy holidays!

Alternate version of the Malfoy Manor description: "The room was excessively opulent. The next room was even more excessive, and even more opulent."]
November began, as Pandora had predicted, with torrential rain. After McGonagall’s sixth years had returned from their practical test in the forest with colds that quickly spread through the dorms, the students were banned from the grounds, even for quidditch and Care of Magical Creatures, until it let up. Slughorn set his NEWT students to brewing Pepper Up potions to keep the Infirmary stocked, the house elves made plain porridges for breakfast and hearty soups for lunch and dinner, and Hagrid brought in massive piles of firewood to fill the stores in the kitchens and keep the fireplaces blazing.

Antsy at having been contained, students turned to petty dramatics to keep themselves entertained. Couples formed and dissolved faster than anyone could keep up with, the Marauders struck again with a prank that charmed several suits of armor to serenade anyone who stepped too close (or, in the case of a handful of Slytherin upperclassmen, challenge them to duels over Hogwarts’ honor), and Filch gleefully reported record number of detentions from students trying caught sneaking out after curfew. And, of course, the latest gossip in the castle was that Lily and James (freshly restored to his full mess of hair) were unofficially dating. Whether or not it was true, in practice it meant very little. Lily continued to deny everything, James fell into a look of dazed wonder whenever she came into the room, and between the two of them still loudly disagreeing on everything from the value of quidditch to the character of Sirius Black, their star-crossed romance carried on in it’s usual daytime soap opera fashion.

Harry watched all of this from the distance that Ravenclaw afforded him, but he had to admit that he was far to invested in the gossip to be considered on the safe side of sanity. It was his parents, though, and every time he saw James catch himself and correct his words or actions to something Lily would approve of, and every time Lily slipped and allowed a smile for James’ ridiculous antics, it was like reaching the point in a good book where things finally started going right for the characters involved.

It was pleasant escapism, in any case, from his own situation. Severus somehow found the time to dive headfirst into research of his new favorite subject—Harry—and Harry left him to it.

Within days, he realized he was actively keeping what little he knew to himself, since Severus was unlikely to respect his knowledge as valid anyways. Harry was doing his best to avoid Severus, not that Severus seemed to notice, with the ease he found Harry whenever he tried to sequester himself away. The tests ran from the simple (casting a number of spells on an object and asking Harry how many there were) to the stupid (trying to hex Harry without him noticing. For the most part, they were harmless, and he put up with them. He drew the line when Severus showed up in the library with a Regulus as his polyjuiced double and handed Harry a scrap of parchment inscribed with Which of us is which? in Severus’s loopy scrawl.

Harry crumpled up the paper and set it aside, taking up his quill and returning to the spell circle analysis he was writing for runes. The two Slytherins looked at each other in confusion, until at last one spoke up: “Well?”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “I have no interest in playing your games if you are not going to follow the rules.”

They lingered there for a moment longer, then Severus shrugged and handed Regulus a little vial that Harry assumed was an antidote to the polyjuice. Regulus accepted it, but looked down at Harry
apologetically, a strange look on Severus’s borrowed face. “I hope I haven’t offended you, Harry,” he said softly. “Severus just asked me to help try to resolve your battle of riddles…”

Harry snorted, looking up at last as Regulus trailed away. “You haven’t, Reg,” he assured the boy. “But this is a matter solely between Severus and I, though apparently he does not understand that.”

“All right,” said Regulus, shifting from foot to foot. Then he frowned. “Wait, how do you know that I’m—”

“Who else would Severus ask?” Harry said quickly. “You should probably take that, you know. Don’t want to be stuck with the bastard’s face forever. Go on.”

Regulus nodded and hurried away, while the real Severus slid into the seat across from Harry, scowling. “What’s your problem now, Harrigan?”

“I told you: no one else can know,” Harry growled, looking down at his homework again and spotting a spelling error to resolve.

“I didn’t tell him anything,” Severus countered. “He thought it was—”

“A ‘battle of riddles’.”

“Yes. And now you’ve gone and upset him. Real classy.”

“Are you trying to guilt trip me? It won’t work. I haven’t done anything, and you have.”

Severus shrugged. “So could you tell? Before we spoke, I mean.”

"Oh, no, no, no." Harry jabbed his quill at Severus, ignoring the drop of ink that splattered across the textbook he had open between them. "You aren't getting anything out of me, not if you're going to break the very, very simple rules we have laid out here."

"Regulus isn't going to tell anyone, and even if he were, he has no idea what's actually going on. We just went over that."

"Right," said Harry. "And how, exactly, were you going to explain if I identified you both correctly?"

"The same way you just did, I imagine. Or some better lie—it's Regulus. He'll believe anything."

"You give him too little credit, and you know it."

"Well, how was I supposed to know for sure? I can't exactly clone myself, and if there's no one else you've told..."

"You could have asked," Harry hissed. "And, for that matter, you could have just polyjuiced yourself, and asked if I could tell the difference."

"The results would be biased. You knowing ahead of time defeats the purpose of the test—"

"No, they wouldn't have. You just wouldn't have been able to trust them, because for some reason you've got it into your head that I am incapable of knowing anything on my own, or providing accurate information."

Severus's face was scrunched up in the way it always was when he was honestly confused, and Harry sighed. It was no use trying to explain basic courtesy and decency to the Slytherin. Harry was
half convinced Severus didn’t have a concept of it, let alone understand the importance.

"In any case, your little test might have worked even if you did ask me, because it would still have been able to show whether or not I could identify the difference. I obviously was able to tell that one of you had been polyjuiced when two of you suddenly appeared, and asking me ahead of time wouldn't have corrupted that."

"Would you have said yes, if I had asked?"

"No," Harry snapped. "Is it possible to get anything through that thick head of yours? I don't want anyone else in any way, shape, or form, involved. No one. Not Reg, not any of the Professors, not some stranger off the street. Don't you get it?"

"You are being pointlessly difficult," Severus whined.

Harry’s quill snapped in his hand.

"But," Severus quickly went on, "I will make sure to follow that in the future. Not like I could have known today, in any case, that you would be that rigid about it."

"Which is why you should have asked." Harry, pulling out his wand to fix his quill, had half a mind to hex Severus while he was at it.

"Alright. I should have asked. I apologize for not doing so."

Harry just rolled his eyes and charmed the quill back to normal, and cast a quick tergeo to get the splattered ink off of his textbook page. Then he pulled his homework close, determined to get the analysis done so he could take the lesson and apply it to some of the spell-circles he had translated earlier from the journal he was still working on for Oxford, and maybe finally make some progress in constructing a way back to the nineties, where Severus would be older but at least not strangely persistent in his pursuit of Harry's company...

"Well?" Severus asked after a moment, when it became clear that Harry intended to ignore him.

"Well what?"

"Were you able to tell? You did correctly identify Regulus, but I imagine that was because his magic was familiar to you, and you could tell the difference between his and mine. But were you able to detect the effects of the Polyjuice at work as well?"

Harry sighed, considering his options. He could tell Severus that it had been clear that the Regulus-as-Severus had been under the effects of a potion, one that affected his whole body indiscriminately, which in Harry’s limited experience was a relatively rare mode of operation, but then again…

The clock bell tolled in the distance, and Harry started. They had Charms in twenty minutes, which was a perfect excuse if he had ever found one. He stood, cast a drying charm on his essay, and tucked his homework into his bag.

“Harry?” Severus said. “Are you going to answer me?”

“Hm…” Harry said, shouldering his things. “No, I don’t think so.”

He turned to head to Charms, and Severus sprang up, falling into step. “Oh, come on, Harry. You can’t be serious. After all the effort I went to make this work—”
“You should have asked!”

The first letter arrived Wednesday, November the tenth. Since the Halloween fiasco, Harry had retreated to taking all of his meals in the kitchen, rather than face the crowds again, much to Hector's chagrin. But he hadn't had any lapses in his ability to keep his head since then, working through the headaches he'd gotten in Charms and Transfiguration without losing his head, and even Severus's prodding was no more than an irritation, so he finally gave in and let Hector drag him down to breakfast in the Great Hall, where Pandora greeted him with her usual unruffled and cheerful morning demeanor.

"Good Morning, Harry," she said. "I expect the rain will be letting up this afternoon, if you're here for breakfast."

"Thank you for your report, Miss Moone. Now over to Smithe, with the latest on the developing porridge situation."

Hector punched his arm and, to be trite, spooned Harry far more porridge than he could possibly eat in one sitting. "There's cinnamon in there, smells like," he commented as he passed Harry the berries to mix in.

"Really? What an fascinating development. After the break, we'll head into the daily soup forecast. Will there be bay leaves?"

"Oh, shut it," Hector grumbled as Harry started humming the BBC news jingle—probably the wrong one, in the seventies, but it got the point across. Pandora, a pureblood with no experience of the nightly news, used blueberries to form a smiley face to decorate her breakfast.

That was when the owl swooped down and landed on the table beside Harry. He blinked, surprised to have mail. There was the occasional letter from Oxford, clarifying something in his regular reports about his progress in translating the journal, but beyond that he had never received post.

“Oh,” said Pandora, “That owl’s been here all week, up in the rafters. She must have been waiting for you.”

“That’s… odd,” said Harry. “She’s beautiful.”

“An Ural owl, I think.”

“If you came down to eat like a normal student she wouldn’t have had to wait around,” Hector pointed out. Harry just shrugged, and, looking at the bird, hoped she had left to find something to eat.

Still, he couldn't find anything imposing about the letter; it bore only the regular traces of intent that Dumbledore had once explained to him all post carried by owls contained, so he untied the twine from the owl's ankle and accepted broke the plain seal stamped on the envelope to hold it closed.

Mr. Harrigan , it began,
Harry froze, and unfolded the letter entirely, revealing at the bottom the signature: a single, if ornately flourished, letter V.

He shuddered. What on earth was Voldemort of all people writing him for? It couldn’t be a form letter, starting like that—though maybe further down… No, scratch that question, he didn't want to know—he had sworn to himself that he was going to redouble his efforts to remain uninvolved in the political situation of the seventies, and any interaction with Voldemort in any form was definitely far too close to the trouble for him to justify… But he was curious, almost as curious as he was over what Voldemort could possibly have seen in his scar that night to justify grabbing him like that—and that was a curiosity that had kept him up at night several times in the past week.

Either way, it wasn't safe to keep a letter like that out in the Great Hall, so he folded it up and tucked it into his robes. Hector and Pandora were luckily caught up in Hector explaining the BBC, and didn't question the letter. They hadn't asked him about Halloween, either, which he was doubly thankful for. It seemed that the conversation he had with Hector before he left had finally got the other boy to back off from his self-appointed roles as political missionary, and either he'd told Pandora or she had figured it out the way she figured out anything else, which was to say, only Merlin knew.

Over the course of the day, he managed to forget about the letter, pushing it to the back of his mind in a blatant misuse of the techniques the occlumency book had taught him. McGonagall assigned a partner project, and everyone was in an uproar all again over the gossip that James and Lily had agreed to partner together. Everyone except Severus, that was, whose usual partner was off with another Slytherin, and who sat himself next to Harry and shot him a look as if challenging Harry to reject his partnership. Later that afternoon, in Herbology, Professor Sprout reported that there was flooding in greenhouse six, and that their job would be to suit up in transfigured wellies and wade through the mud and safely recover the plants that were housed there. Despite the boots, most of them fell at some point or another, so they all came away with more of their bodies covered in mud than not, and had to race against an irritated Filch and each other to get up to the showers in their dorms first.

It was only when he was carefully emptying the pockets of his muddied robe that Harry found the letter again. He frowned, sitting down on his bed, and considered it carefully. If it was a matter of secrecy that had him worried, Hector was known among the Ravenclaws for his long showers, and probably wouldn't make it out for another twenty minutes at least, and the letter was a single sheet. If it was a matter of involvement... Voldemort had no way of knowing whether or not he had opened the letter, aside from the owl returning to him without burden.

No, what he should have been worried about was that if he read the contents of the letter, he might risk getting himself more involved than he should be. But he wanted to read the letter, almost like he was under a compulsion—but no, the letter was free of any spells. He knew that he shouldn't be involved, but it was just a letter, he thought, and he still couldn't know why Voldemort was writing to him. Did he write to everyone who attended his rallies? That seemed impractical, from the size of the crowd that evening. Had something else happened when he had been incapable of knowing? Severus had explained, later, that it had just seemed as though Harry had been frozen under the sudden attention, possibly drunk and incredibly anxious, and that because he had mentioned his crowd-shyness to Regulus anyone who had seen it would know through Walburga’s tendency to gossip.
At last he gave in, and opened the letter back up, examining the perfectly slanted and legible cursive carefully before beginning to read.

Mr. Harrigan,

I hope this letter finds you well. I couldn’t help but notice that at the Hallow's Eve meeting you seemed indisposed, though your friend Mr. Snape did so insist it was simply the elf wine getting to your head. Strange, dear Lucius seemed convinced that neither of you had indulged in that pleasure, but if you are so susceptible to alcohol as to become ill over that, I might suggest you avoid it in the future.

You may be wondering what someone such as I would be doing writing to a student such as yourself. I must admit, I find myself asking the same question. According to Lucius, you are a relatively unassuming figure at Hogwarts, despite your impressive receipt of a research scholarship to Oxford, a truly astonishing feat for one of your young age. I expect that must have required some strong recommendation from your Professors, particularly Professor Dumbledore, your esteemed headmaster. However, none of your colleagues seem to recall you ever standing out in class, aside from your swift movement upwards through the Ancient Runes curriculum. As I myself have a passion for studying such powerful forms of spellcasting that Runic work can provide, I cautiously admire your devotion to the study, if it is truly so impressive as has been reported. You must be an honor to the house of Ravenclaw, if it is the case.

My true motivation in writing you, however, has little to do with your studies, although they do appear to be the most notable thing of your apparently private life. Rather, I write in inquiry after the scar that runs across your forehead, which I noticed on Hallow's Eve appears to be dark in origin. You disguise it admirably, as I imagine any would when stuck with a scar across their face, but dark magic leaves behind unmistakable traces. While I suppose it would be of little interest to you to hear the details, as the foremost Dark Lord of Europe at present time, it is curious to me how so insignificant a child could come to bear such a mark.

The owl which I have used to deliver this letter will wait for your reply. Her name is Isis; if you call for her in the owlery, she will come down to you. Please respond at your earliest convenience, as I am quite busy at the present and disinterested in waiting for you to formulate a perfectionist’s answer.

V

Harry stared at the letter in disbelief. Of course, it had to be his scar that Voldemort had wanted to question. Why did it always have to be the bloody scar? Whatever connection it formed between them in the nineties, that didn't exist at the present, and it seemed ridiculous for Voldemort to have been bothered by it enough to write him about it.

He read the letter again, trying to search for any further motivations, but unless Voldemort routinely sent vaguely insulting letters as a method of entertainment, it seemed to truly be nothing more than a letter of inquiry regarding his scar. A show of power, perhaps, in getting information from Lucius, but he wasn't sure why Voldemort would possibly want to show power to someone like Harry, who Voldemort seemed to be questioning the worth of writing himself.

Well, if he was so uncertain, then Harry's work was cut out for him. He would have to reply, as stealing Voldemort's owl seemed like a petty and short-sighted revenge, but he would reply in such a way that not even the Dark Bastard could possibly find it worth his while to bother with him again. After that, all Harry had to do was remain under the radar and find his way back to the nineties.
quickly... which was his plan anyways, even if his definition of 'quickly' had already been rewritten several times.

Harry sat down at his desk, pushing aside the stack of books on obscure versions of runic alphabets and independent symbols, found a clean sheet of parchment, a fresh quill, and some ink, and set to work.

*Dear Sir,* he wrote, not knowing how else to address the man,

*I guess I'll have to begin this by saying I hope you aren't bother if I'm being forward. I've been told its all I know how to be, and you did want a quick reply, so here goes nothing, I guess.*

*I was surprised by your letter. Severus would about have a fit if he knew I was writing this, so it's probably a dumb thing to do, but I'm doing it anyways. Mail from you was not expected. Or wanted. I have no interest in politics, and basically anything involving you is going to be political, weird personal questions or not. I was only at the meeting because of Severus, anyways. He was hoping I would change my mind about some things, but we have really different ideas about the world, and taking me to an overtly political group holiday party or whatever that was isn't going to make me want to be involved. Sorry if being blunt makes me sound rude, but I want nothing to do with you.*

*But I guess I can satisfy your curiosity about my scar, because there's not much to say. I've had it since I was a baby. All I know is it probably came from a bounced curse intended for someone else, because it doesn't affect me in any way, except for determining my hair style. My parents aren't around to provide any answers about it, and even if they were, I wouldn't be interested in knowing, and the scar is more an annoying reminder that they're gone than anything else, so your inquiry was an unwelcome sort of personal, considering we are perfect strangers.*

* D Harrigan*

Satisfied with his work, he folded the letter up, not bothering to wait for the ink to dry or searching for an envelope. If it got to Voldemort all beat up, all the better. It wasn't his problem if Voldemort couldn't read it.

He had just stood up to put it in his bag when Hector came in, his hair dripping wet. "Have you noticed? The rain's stopped."

Harry glanced at the window. He had been so focused he hadn't noticed the silence in the tower, but now that Hector had pointed it out, it was strange after so much rain at all hours of the day. "Huh," he said. "Pandora was right."

"I was?" she said, coming to stand in the door just then. "About what?"

Hector, who was just coming in from the showers and only halfway dressed, hurried to pull a shirt on.

"About the rain. You were right, it stopped."

"Of course she was," Hector said, his head popping out through the neck hole of a Ravenclaw blue sweater. "I mean, this is Pandora we're talking about. Weather is not exactly an amazing prediction."

Harry frowned. "Am I missing something?"
"You came to breakfast this morning," Pandora said, like that explained everything.

Hector turned to fix his hair by the little mirror he had on his desk, but when he turned around and found Harry still confused, he froze. "You can't be serious," he said.

"What?" asked Harry.

"Harry, are you... an idiot?"

"Uh," said Harry. He certainly was feeling like one, out of the loop as he apparently was.

"You... honestly haven't realized? Pandora is a seer."

An image of Pandora wearing Trelawney's bug-eyed glasses came to mind, but he quickly shoved it aside. "She's a what?"

"A seer," Hector said again, glancing at Pandora as though honestly alarmed that Harry had never figured this out before. "You know. Look into the future, see what happens?"

"That's a prophet, Hector, and you know it," Pandora corrected mildly. She came into the room and pulled Harry down to sit on the edge of his bed. "I'm told I see the world differently from everyone else. You only see things as they happen, but I see... possibilities. The way things might play out, a thousand times over. Sometimes things are a bit more certain, like today—I knew for certain that when you came down to breakfast in the Great Hall again, the rain was going to stop."

"...is that why you dragged me down there today?" Harry asked Hector, because that was the most formulated question he could manage at this point.

Hector turned red, which seemed to be an answer, though Harry couldn't be sure what it meant, precisely. "I'm not sure how you could have not noticed before now, honestly," Hector said instead. "I mean, not to be mean, Pan, but you're not exactly subtle."

"I wouldn't know how to be," Pandora agreed, though she was still looking into Harry's eyes. "The future is as much a part of my day to day life as the past is to yours."

That cleared up absolutely nothing. Did she mean to imply that she knew Harry was from the future? No, she had just said that she wouldn't know how to be subtle—but it was too direct, it had to be—but he couldn't ask, could he, not without risking uncovering something she didn't know.

"Really?" Hector asked again. "You're really that surprised?"

"Uh, not at all, actually," Harry admitted. It was true, most of the time she was able to guess exactly how things would play out, but Harry had always put that down to her just being observant of the world in a way he wasn't. "More curious about how that works."

"Well, I can recommend some books," Hector offered. "Don't ask Pandora to explain it. The last time I asked, it was traumatizing."

"How was I to know that you—"

"Pandora," Hector moaned.

"Books would be nice, thanks," Harry said. His mind was racing forward, and not about whatever Hector was embarrassed about. If it was possible to see outcomes of the future—the implications that the future was something that could be looked into with definite points was certainly fatalistic, but
how that might play into his research about time…

“Sure thing,” said Hector. “Are you coming to study group? Evans asked me earlier if she could bring Potter along, since he’s her partner for the Transfiguration assignment, and I said it was alright, but I know you and he are…”

“Potter’s fine,” he said absently. He was still studying Pandora. He knew she had to be Luna’s mother—Pandora didn’t have any siblings, and they were too similar in appearance for them not to be related. Besides that, Luna was just as… unique as Pandora. Was she a seer, too? Did Pandora know about Luna? Had she seen Luna and him meeting—him disappearing from the future—

“Harry,” she said gently, patting his hand. “You’re thinking too hard.”

“Sorry,” he said, forcing himself to look away. She couldn’t possibly appreciate being stared at by a gaping idiot. “I—yes, I’ll be at study group. What are we going over?”

“Transfiguration,” Hector repeated. “I think maybe you should go outside instead. You’re going stir crazy, stuck inside like this.”

“And you’re not?” Harry shot back.

“He’ll go up to the owlery later,” Pandora assured Hector, getting to her feet and pulling Harry up with her before he could get stuck thinking about how she knew that. “But if we stick around here any longer, we’re going to be late.”

When Harry went up to the owlery after dinner, he was surprised to find the owl, Isis, waiting for him. Voldemort had written that she would, but he’d seen owls told to wait for an answer, and they typically followed the unfortunate recipient around, seeming to get some sort of sardonic pleasure out of harassing their victim. This bird simply took one of the treats he’d scavenged from the bottom of his trunk (he hoped Hedwig wouldn’t mind, and that someone was taking care of her in the future, if he had—or would, rather, be missing for as long as he was stuck in the past, a theory he hadn’t yet ruled out) and put her leg out patiently while Harry fumbled to tie the letter. She nipped at his hand when he gave her neck a feather-ruffling rub, then flew away, leaving him haunted by his doubts about whether replying really was a good idea and his memories of Hedwig.

He hoped that would be the last of the matter. It was not, of course. Whatever had prompted Voldemort to write him in the first place would not be diverted by one letter matching in vague rudeness to the one Voldemort had sent him, and he logically knew that, even if he wasn't prepared to accept it. Still, he hoped, but when Isis came to rest on the breakfast table Friday morning, her beautifully striated wings tucking into her body and turning her into a ball of black and white fluff, sleepy black eyes blinking and a low coo greeting him, Harry couldn't do anything but sigh.

"How did someone like him get an owl like you?" he asked softly, trading the owl a bit of his sausage for the letter. Isis just swallowed the meat and stuck her head in his goblet.

"That explains it," he muttered. "You both think you can just show up and butt your head in my things."

The owl, apparently unaware of or unable to do anything about the pumpkin juice on the feathers
around her beak, pulled her head out and gave him a look, one eye more closed than the other, clearly conveying that she was unimpressed by his analysis, and flew off, buffeting his head as she went.

Mr. Harrigan,

You may address me as My Lord

Snorting, Harry quickly folded up the letter and shoved it into his bag, hurrying to finish his breakfast. He would read the letter later. Maybe. After class... or over the weekend. Maybe if he waited a few days he could just forget about it?

Across from him, Pandora raised an eyebrow. "A proposal?"

Harry choked, spewing eggs onto the platter of kippers between them. Hector, who had been reaching to serve himself, yelped in disgust.

"No!"

Harry maybe said it a bit too loud, because his voice drew looks from the other tables. He felt his ears reddening and ducked his head, grabbing his goblet before realizing the owl had stuck her face in it. He put it back down in embarrassed misery.

"Don't look so put out, Harry," Pandora said, reaching across the table to pat his hand. She had, he noticed, painted her nails Ravenclaw blue with metallic bronze tips. He'd never noticed her with painted nails before, but he supposed he didn't usually pay attention to that sort of thing. "Most magical bindings only go to the death, these days. If you don't like it, you'll just have to outlive it."

Harry stared, gaping in horror at the thought of marrying Voldemort, of all people. Since learning about Pandora's gift on Wednesday, he found himself more confused than ever by the strange things she said, and could only follow Hector's lead. Luckily, Hector was always eager to get in on any conversation.

"Are you telling him to get married in hopes that he'll be an early widower?" he asked, tilting his head. "That only makes sense if there's something in it for him. Is she wealthy, Harry?"

"I said no," he repeated.

"A good library, then?"

"It wasn't a proposal!"

"Are you sure?" Pandora asked. "You only looked for a moment."

She looked honestly surprised, and Harry was beginning to panic at the thought that there was a possibility—no, there wasn't.

"Of course I'm sure! I've been proposed to before, you know," he grumbled, thinking of the heaps of letters he had received during and after the Triwizard tournament. Still, it took Harry a moment to realize he'd actually mentioned the previous proposals out loud, and that Hector and Pandora wouldn't and shouldn't know about those, and cursed, which only served to make them more
surprised. "Are you sure you're not Slytherins?" he asked, pushing the conversation forward. "Honestly, marry and murder. Lovely. Just like..."

He managed to stop himself this time, but not before Pandora's eyes widened even further. Harry wondered if living in such close contact with the house elves had stretched her eyes to greater than normal eye-widening capacity.

"Murder?" she said softly. "Oh, Harry, never, no, I didn't..."

"Yes, you did," said Hector. Pandora looked between them, then seemed to retreat into herself, staring down at the artistic arrangement of food on her plate but not moving to eat it.

Harry and Hector exchanged looks, but there was nothing for it when Pandora got like this. It was part of why Harry hadn't ever put together that she was a seer on his own, he just thought she was sensitive to things he would never notice and numb to things that seemed obvious, the way Luna was. Harry could only follow Hector's lead, and Hector seemed to think the best course of action was to turn back to his breakfast—kipper-free—so Harry did the same.

~

Mr. Harrigan,

You may address me as My Lord. I am not currently your professor, although I do not mind being considered a teacher of sorts, and I have not been knighted or otherwise titled a Sir.

While I do admire your courage, in a way, I also remember how young men often do not realize when they tempt fate. They might think they do not need guidance and mentors, and make reckless choices and assumptions in fulfilling their rebellious urges. It is strange to find such a young man in Ravenclaw, a house valuing careful thought and consideration of minutia. Perhaps meticulousness is your disadvantage for all that it blinds to the larger world, which is more complex than those who only look at the details can understand; a tree, after all, cannot be understood by examining a single leaf. To attempt to do so is a foolish endeavor. No matter how carefully you examine it and dissect its structure, a leaf on its own will quickly die, and then you will be left studying a skeleton, while the tree grows on.

As you seem to profess disinterest in critically examining your own personal history, I have had the matter looked into. After all, it is important for all of us to remember from whence we came. Perhaps you will be surprised to find that you do not exist? Beyond a paltry paper trail, "D Harrigan", or any "Harrigan" family, for that matter, does not exist among any ministry records. According to your peers, you appeared at the beginning of your previous school year as a transfer student, are properly named “Dudley”, profess to have been trained previously by a tutoring circle, and were already a year ahead of your classmates in your studies due to not having completed your OWLs following the “magical accident” that forced your transfer. This information is backed only by the word of your esteemed headmaster and, of course, the acceptable results of your OWLs. Your appointment to take the Ancient Runes OWL with this year’s fifth years is unusual, though not unprecedented, and if last year’s results are anything to go by, I expect you to earn another ‘Outstanding’;

Beyond that limited biographical information, I have been informed that you seem to suffer streaks of brash behavior, as I have already observed. It is said that on occasion you seem to assume a
nearly Gryffindor persona, abandoning care in order to step into potentially dangerous situations. That is an unfortunate trait, one that you would do well to rid yourself of, assuming you wish to survive long enough to live a productive life. You are otherwise reported as unremarkable, studious Ravenclaw, although you seem too to suffer a curiosity driving you to research odd topics and only half-heartedly attempt your proper homework. Curiosity is better nourished than starved, but one would think preparations for your NEWTs would take precedence, especially if you are intending to seek further work at OMRL following your graduation.

No one seems to have any knowledge about your scar; indeed most were completely unaware of it, at least until our little encounter. I therefore require further information. Curse scars are no matter to be trifled with, no matter how little you profess to care about the source. It has been brought to my attention that you seem to have a masterful command of the Hogwarts library; as such, I suggest you seek out Grant Lysander’s Treatise on the Darkest Arts, Vol 7 and reference pages 714-756, a section cover residual effects of dark spells. The collection should still be held in the shelves beneath the stained glass depicting Ainsley the Wise treating with the Goblin Nation.

While you are in the library, I might also suggest seeking out the stacks devoted to English Grammar and penmanship. Your future as a researcher will indeed be brief if you cannot clearly communicate your findings.

Isis waits for your reply. I imagine she got rather hungry waiting three days for the last one, as she is unfailingly obedient. You might look to her for inspiration.

V

Harry folded up the letter with shaking hands, eyes drifting to settle on a point in the great fireplace that his semi-permanent seat in the kitchens was positioned beside. He’d made it to dinner without giving in to the anxious curiosity that had been urging him to open or incendio the parchment all day. But what could he do, save to open it? Go to Dumbledore for help, and explain that he had gone to a Death Eater meeting? That would reveal Severus, at least, if not also Regulus and Mulciber and Avery. While he did not care for the last two and wasn’t exactly happy knowing Severus and Regulus were to become Death Eaters, he knew that in the future he came from all four of them had. He couldn’t risk Dumbledore having the evidence he needed to interfere with that, and even if he could—why would Dumbledore trust him, if he admitted to attending a Death Eater meeting? He was at the Headmaster’s mercy to defend the created story of his past, as Voldemort’s letter had made all too clear, and he could not risk losing that.

Nor could he risk not responding. Aside from the implication that Isis might starve to death (and how would he even approach finding out how to remove a compulsion from a bird?) he still wasn’t looking to put himself in even more danger by stealing the up and coming Dark Lord’s owl. He supposed he could send back a blank page… doubtless Voldemort would just return the bird for a proper response.

“Master Harry?”

Harry started, finding Hani standing nervously at the end of the duplicate Ravenclaw table, where she set his meals out for him. “Oh, thank you,” he said, hurrying to take his seat. Since the rain had broke, they were finally free of the diet of porridge and soup, and he dug eagerly into the round meat pie that waited on his plate.

“Is Master Harry’s letter bearing bad news?” Hani asked when he had taken a few bites.
Harry chewed thoughtfully, wondering how he could explain the situation. “Remember how out of it I was on Halloween?” he asked her.

Hani nodded, blinking her wide eyes somberly.

“Well, the Hallow’s Eve gathering I went to… it was actually a political meeting, led by a… very powerful wizard. He’s the reason why I got so overwhelmed.”

She tilted her head. “Master Harry went to a political meeting.”

“Yes.”

“Hani is wondering why. Normally Master Harry is minding his own nose.”

Harry laughed at the expression, thinking it oddly apt for the situation, although the Voldemort he’d run into had a mostly normal appearance—including a proper human nose—at this point. “Yes,” he said, “But Severus was going and convinced me to come along, and it seemed like the only way I could get him to stop nagging me. Besides, when I… go home and don’t have to keep my nose so much to myself, I thought it would be useful information for me to have.”

Hani nodded slowly. She understood better than anyone Harry’s situation, being the only one other than Dumbledore who knew about the time travel and so close a friend as she had become.

“And the letter?” she asked.

Harry sighed. “The letter is from the powerful wizard. You may have heard of him before… the Dark Lord, Voldemort.”

Hani recoiled back, her wrinkled skin losing color. So she had heard of him. It was hard for him to tell who had and who had not—Dumbledore was fully cognisant of the silent war, but even Hector, who kept careful track of political events, seemed lost as to how far things had already progressed.

“Why is Master Harry receiving a letter from him? That one is being a very, very bad wizard.”

“I know,” Harry said glumly. “It was probably reckless of me to have gone to that meeting, knowing he would be there, but I did. His magic is… terrifying, Hani, simply terrifying. I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t anything.”

“Master Harry is needing to be more careful,” Hani said. “Why is he writing?”

“I got unlucky. Stood out,” Harry said with a shrug. “And… since I’m, well, me, no one could really answer his questions about me.”

She frowned. “What sorts of questions?”

“Ones I can’t answer. Only, he’s not the sort of person you can ignore.” When he saw Hani’s ears drooping, he quickly amended, “I am replying, don’t worry. Just have to do my best to convince him that I’m not interesting.”

Hani shook her head. “It is impossible, Master Harry.”

He laughed. “Should I be flattered, or offended?”

But Hani just shook her head and went away, leaving Harry to his thoughts.
Harry spent that Saturday in the library, studiously avoiding the stained glass of Ainsley the Wise and any dark arts books that might be tucked away underneath it. He did, however, give in to the urge to locate a book about owls, and found that as Pandora had guessed, Isis was an Ural owl. *Strix Uralensis*. They were typically found in Russia and Scandinavia. Like Harry, she was out of place here.

He quickly put the book away when Severus entered the library. The Slytherin was enough a source of stress without any involvement in Voldemort’s unwanted correspondence, and Harry had another secret he was needing to breach with him, anyways. He waved Severus over to their usual table, but then hesitated, not comfortable with how public the library was.

“Know any good wards?”

Severus raised an eyebrow, but took out his wand. First he cast the basic proximity ward they had learned in defense (one of the more useful spells their paranoid teacher, Professor Burke, had taught), and followed it up with another spell Harry had never heard before. It clung to the proximity ward, and gave Harry the distinct impression that there were hundreds of magical worms crawling on the surface.

“What was that?”

“*Muffliato,*” Severus intoned, a hint of pride in his voice. “Finally got it finished last week.”

“‘Got it finished?’”

“Spells are picky. You’ve got to get the incantation just right, or it will never work, no matter how carefully you construct the rest of it. I was trying for a form of ‘mumble’, but I was intending for the effect to be on the sound, not the voice, so—”

“Wait, you’re saying you invented that?”

“No, I just waved my wand about saying *m*-words until something worked. Yes, you dolt.” Harry must have looked suitably impressed, because Severus’s pale cheeks gained pink splotches. “It’s not so different from writing spell circles in runes. You gotten to that yet?”

“We’ve just started.”

“Well, once you get the concept, it’s not… it’s a similar process.”

“So you’ve been making your own spells for a year?”

“Longer than that,” Severus admitted. “Not all of us sit around waiting until we cover subjects in class, you know. Anyways, you wanted privacy?”

Harry nodded, brushing past Severus’s jab with the knowledge that *he* wasn’t getting paid to do runic translation work for the OMRL. Then again, neither was Harry, until he found the time to finish it… But now was not the time. He took a deep breath and steadied his focus and resolve.

“What do you know about legilimency?”

Severus’s eyebrows went up again. If he had been curious before, now he was intrigued. “Are you
planning to break into someone’s mind?”

Harry shook his head. “The opposite,” he said. “I’ve been studying occlumency, but…”

“Occlumency?”

“The defense against legilimency. A sort of… mental protection.”

Severus nodded slowly. “Has anyone ever told you you’re paranoid?”

Harry nearly laughed. To be called paranoid, by Severus Snape? Future king of believing that everyone was against him, super secret spy of the Order of the Phoenix and Voldemort both? The only way it could be worse would be to get called paranoid by Mad-Eye Moody, the ex-auror who had fights with suspicious-looking dustbins.

“So, give me one person who is more likely than not to be a legilimens.”

Severus considered. “Dumbledore.”

This time, Harry did laugh. “Well, yes, though not who I was thinking of. Try—”

“He is?”

Severus looked honestly disturbed by this revelation, which gave Harry pause. “Well, yes. But it’s not like he goes around looking into people’s thoughts. It’s a terribly controversial skill.” That didn’t seem to reassure the Slytherin, but Harry shrugged and pushed on. “I more meant his opposite.”

“The Dark Lord,” Severus said lowly. His look of horror turned into one of suspicion. “Why on earth do you expect the Dark Lord is going to bother to legilimize you? I’d rather assumed you wouldn’t go to another meeting unless we figured out a way to block the overstimulation thing.”

“Try never,” Harry said flatly. “I’d rather stay far, far away from any of this, but also? Life hates me. I’m not going to risk running into someone that can both render me helpless and tear into my brain without being absolutely certain that my mental defenses are going to hold. A good legilimens, you won’t ever even know they’re there… and he’s one of the best, whether I’m zoned out or not.”

Severus was still skeptical, clearly, but he nodded. “And why are you bringing this up with me? Normally you keep things so… close to the chest.”

“I can read about occlumency all day long, I can sit around meditating and building walls in my mind, but I can’t actually test it on my own.”

“You want me to learn legilimency.”

“I want you to learn legilimency.”

It was a risk, to be certain, but he knew he had gotten almost infinitely better at occlumency since he’d started following the meditative exercises in Hermione’s book every night, and he didn’t think that someone new to the magic would be able to break them down completely. Actually, he was fairly confident that when he got back to the nineties, even Professor Snape would have a hard time faulting his defenses. Everything about the future he’d found homes for buried deep, deep within the recesses of his mind. He could still draw on the memories easily enough, but with the help of the meditative practices from Hermione’s book he’d been able to tie everything he thought might be important behind memories of little impact. His first five years of Herbology, for example, he’d hidden behind memories of hours of weeding at the Dursleys, and Potions classes had been tucked
away within memories of Aunt Petunia teaching him how to cook. If he needed to, he could go further—the book had techniques for binding memories away so deeply that only a spell paired with a password-like trigger phrase could release them, but those were considered extremely dangerous, as there was no telling what effect forcing yourself to forget parts of your life might have on your psyche.

Harry didn’t think he needed to go that far, but he was at something of a standstill for knowing how to move forward. That was why he was asking Severus to learn and test him. As long as he could get a decent idea of where his weaknesses were, he’d be able to move forward.

“And what would I get out of this?”

Harry blinked. “...aside from the rare and useful ability to read minds?”

Severus leaned back, picking something out from under his nails. Hopefully not the armadillo bile they had been using in potions that morning. “It is also, as you put is, controversial. And if I am going to risk my reputation to learn something like that, not to mention put forward the time, there’s gotta be something to make it worth it.”

Harry sighed. Severus was just being difficult, but he was particularly good at that, so he cast about thinking of bargaining chips.

“I’ll tell you if your polyjuice test worked.”

Severus scowled. “I am already planning the alternative you insisted I come up with.”

“Going to waste the time brewing polyjuice again? It takes…” Harry frowned. “Hang on a minute, how did you get ahold of polyjuice so quickly? It takes a month to complete, at least.”

“You really think I’d never tried the potion before? I’d had that batch under a stasis charm for years.”

“But that was it, wasn’t it? And you’re going to have to brew more, and do you really want to use it for something that I could just give you the answer to.”

“Ahh, yes,” Severus said dryly, “You could just give it to me. Seems rather a disbalanced equation here, what with my part in this learning an arguably illegal magical technique.”

Yes, he was truly gifted in being difficult. Harry, however, was quick to find a different solution.

“How about this, then. You get to try and legilimize me.”

Severus frowned. “That is what you was, Harry, try again.”

“No, it’s what you want.” Harry smiled. “You’re so curious as to how my magic sensing works? What better way to understand it than getting into my mind? To witness it practically first-hand.”

Severus was giving him a narrow look, but Harry knew he had him. “And you’ll be using… occlumency to try to stop me.”

“It will motivate you to give me a worthwhile test.”

Severus sat for a full minute, no doubt weighing whether it was worth it or not to try to squeeze more out of Harry. “Alright,” he said at last. “I’ll learn legilimency and use it against you, if you answer my questions about the polyjuice test. Now.”
Harry offered a hand across the table, though he hesitated for a moment when Severus reached out to clasp it. “One addendum,” he decided. “You will only use legilimency against me when I am working on my occlumency. And if you get caught using it on anyone else, I am not the one who taught you.”

“I am not completely without principles, Harrigan,” said Severus, offense turning up his nose.

“Alright,” said Harry. They clasped hands. “We have a deal.”

“We have an accord,” Severus corrected, gripping tighter at Harry’s hand. “If you’re going to say it, say it properly. Now tell me about the polyjuice.”

Harry thought back. ‘First, I could tell that it was Regulus, because his magic stayed the same. If it were a complete stranger posing as someone familiar, or the other way around, I would be able to tell they were in disguise. Second, I could tell that he was under the effects of a potion, and it affected his entire body. I’ve not seen any other potions behave like that—usually they run through the blood and a specific focus area. Potentially there are others, but it would be enough to rouse suspicion.”

Severus studied him, processing this information with his mouth partially open. Harry shook his hand slightly. “You can let go now,” he prompted, when that did nothing.

Severus did, and leaned back in his seat. “Alright,” he said. “How do you plan for me to learn legilimency?”

Harry winced a bit. “Well, it’s going to be a bit of reconstruction.”

“Reconstruction?”

“I’ve got a book,” he said, drawing it out of his bag. “With a description of how it works…but it’s from the point of view of trying to learn occlumency, and not entirely focused on its use in defending against legilimency, more the various benefits of having an organized mind…”

“That’s it?” Severus asked flatly.

“I know the incantation is Legilimens, and it’s not got any fancy wand work to go with it, or any of that.”

“That helps about as much as…What you’re asking, it’s like telling me the Chinese word for dog and asking me to use it in a sentence.”

“There might be books in the restricted section, but I’ve never seen any…” Harry sighed, pushing his hand through his hair. “I could…probably cast it on you, if that would help.”

“You can cast it, but you can’t teach it?”

“Well, I’ve never actually done it intentionally—but I know what it feels like!”

“Oh, and if I cast the Peruvian Blood-Cooling Charm on you, and gave you the incantation, would that be enough for you to figure it out?”

“With some trial and error!”

Severus chewed on his lip, as though trying to figure out whether or not Harry was being serious. Then he sighed, reaching for the book. “Fine. I’ll read that first, though, and if it comes to that you’ll be trying it on animals first, not experimenting using my brain.”
“Right,” said Harry. But he looked down at the book, even as Severus’s hand twitched in impatient irritation. “Just,” Harry added, flipping the book open to reveal the scraps of parchment left inside. About half of them had fallen out of place over the last year, and he’d gathered them in his nightstand upstairs, but the other half were still as Hermione had left them for him, cramped tight with her notes of critical questioning and encouragement. Some of his notes were in there, too, but those weren’t nearly as valuable. “Be careful with these,” he said. “They’re… the only thing I have from… a certain friend of mine. If any fall out, just… just make sure you get them back to me.”

Severus glanced down at visible scrap and nodded wordlessly. Harry, holding back a sigh, closed the book again and passed it over.

“I’ll look over this tonight,” Severus said, putting it in his bag. He brought up his wand and canceled the *muffliato*, to Harry’s immediate relief (really, who ever knew a spell could feel that *wormy*) though he left the proximity one up. “Now, can we get this Transfiguration assignment done with? I have a runes essay to finish today as well.”

Sir, he finally wrote, after two days of asking Hani for any rodents the house elves caught around the castle, which he snuck up to Isis and coaxed her into eating, and careful consideration of how best to reply, *(since you are not my lord nor any lord as far as I know if we’re gonna be technical about it I’ll stick with the usual term for a stranger thanks),*

You won’t find anything much about me. Don’t think there’d be anything in ministry records anyways. Dudley is a really horrid name given by my relatives who wouldn’t want anything to do with a kid with whatever more wizard-y name my mother might have given me and not that you and I are on a first name basis but I usually just go by Harry by my own request and that is better than any name anyone else could give me. Whatever it was my parents named me I don’t really care. I am my own person not limited by family history or the status it carries like some certain unmentionable people are. For all I know my parents were a couple of drunks who ended up in the wrong lane on the motorway. My relatives were muggles and said as much. If they knew they never told me and I never asked. Their dead and were dreadful anyways, so you don’t have to waste your oh so important time threatening them with everything else.

If your trying to weird me out by apparently turning my classmates into stalking creeps than congratulations. Theres no need for it anyways. I’m an open book, as the muggles say.

But you seem to have missed my point. Just because you disagree with my thought process does not mean I have not thought something through, and I can make up my own mind about things without any of your advice. Honestly don’t know why you bothered to write me again at all. If you get some sort of kick out of insulting teenagers well I’d think you’d have better things to do with your time. If your little rant about boys needing mentors was some sort of offer I can think of four different people would be over the moon to hear it instead and I don’t even know or want to know all of your fans.I’ve mostly found mentors to be nosy and controlling so I’m not interested in any more of those. Especially ones hazardous to my health.

Finally I’ve been told my scar is nothing more than a blight to my face so whatever your ob interest in it sorry but I’m going to have to disappoint you. As you said I have NEWTs to prepare for and don’t need to waste any more of my time.
It wasn’t perfect, but it was rude, poorly written, denied Voldemort any of his attempts at holding information over Harry’s head, and he couldn’t make it any clearer he was not interested in playing Voldemort’s games without actually writing that directly.

Severus would probably have a heart attack if he read what Harry had written.

Chapter End Notes

Spent all day at work annoyed that I’d forgotten to upload this beforehand. Ah, well.

Happy New Year to each and every one of you! May 2018 be a little less... 2017. Some of my resolutions include continued commitment to writing every day and to finishing things, as well as, ya know, posting, so it should be a year full of fic from me!

Reminder: this fic will not be updating next week, but every other week from today on. Next week will see the beginning of two AUs from me, which I have been referring to as "The Bad Law Enforcement AU" and "The Script AU". Taking some risks to start out the New Year. We'll see how they end up.

Cheers!
Dear Ron,

I’ve gone and bolloxed things up again. Bet you’re not surprised, only, I don’t have you around to keep me from losing my head or Hermione to figure out how to fix it. It’s been a year and a half, and you’d think by now I’d stop keeping up the list of things to ask Hermione about, but I haven’t. And, right: we still haven’t asked her whether or not it’s legal for Umbridge to refer to werewolves as beasts as a member of the Wizengamot, either. Damn, I’d almost forgotten about Umbridge. If there’s one think worth staying away from the nineties for, it’s her. Haven’t run into her back here, thankfully. You’d think it’d be Voldemort, but…

Voldemort. Right. Yeah, the bolloxing things up again thing? It has to do with the Dark Bastard. Bet you’re not surprised about that, either. You’re still not going to believe me when I tell you, though. I mean, I can’t even believe it, really. I’ve been looking up counter-curses for delusion spells all week, but I’m not under any spells. Any new spells.

Maybe I have gone mental. Maybe this whole thing is a big delusion, and really I’ve been tied to a bed in St Mungo’s for the last year, sharing a room with Lockhart. Can’t say which option’s more likely, really.

Okay, here goes:

Voldemort wrote me a letter. Yeah, that Voldemort, and no, it wasn’t a death threat. Or, wasn’t just a death threat. And there’s been more letters since, because, yeah, this is where my bolloxing thing comes into play: I wrote back. Yeah, I know. Yeah, Hermione’s going to have me deaf in both ears by the time she’s done yelling at me. Yeah, I probably shouldn’t have done that. Yeah… yeah. I’m an idiot.

He’s not responded to the last one, so, hopefully, you know, I insulted him enough that he’s not going to? I dunno. I wish you were here, Ron. You’d get that expression on your face, like, you know I know I’m an idiot, and then you’d get out the chess board and maybe you’d let me win a match before you beat me three different ways. And you’ll stand by when Hermione starts yelling at me, and then she’ll go running off to the library and we’ll get stuck finishing the homework she’ll have reminded us about, and

I’m stuck in the fucking seventies, and I’ve spent more time in the library than anywhere else, and sometimes I hear Hermione’s voice in the back of my head nagging me not to be an idiot. I have gone mental.

Anyways, Voldemort. It’s cause of the scar. Dumbledore did a spell, thankfully, so it’s not the bloody lightning bolt. You probably think it’s stupid, but maybe I can keep it like this, when I get back. It’s nice not to have people staring

Right, Voldemort. I

I am an idiot.

I let Severus—that’s Snape. I call him Severus so I don’t have to think about Snape, meaning the Snape you know. I let Severus and Regulus, Sirius’s younger brother, talk me into going to the
Malfoy’s place for Halloween, which was basically a Death Eater party. Complete with Fairy Wine. Why did I go? Because I’m an idiot, and really, I think you’ll side with Hermione on that. Anyways, because it’s my life we’re talking about, that means I was staring at Voldemort like an idiot, because I was stupid enough to get into the same room as him, and he noticed my scar, because

He’s terrifying, Ron. I’ve never really been scared of him before. I mean, I have. I was scared shitless, that night in the graveyard, and I couldn’t sleep all summer after that, you probably heard me. But it wasn’t like that, back then, because now I know how powerful he is. It wouldn’t matter if he was obliviated of any knowledge of magic or learning how to use it, he’d still be a more powerful wizard than pretty much everyone I’ve ever met. Even

I can’t write it. He can’t be more powerful than Dumbledore. He can’t. He was afraid of Dumbledore, anyways, so Dumbledore has to be more powerful.

He noticed my scar, because he’s a Dark Lord. That’s what he said, in his letter. I think. He’s mostly been insulting me, I think, so it’s hard to tell for sure. I bet he really noticed my scar because he caused it, but I’m not going to let him no that. Him finding out about any of this would be the worst

I can’t write about it anymore, but I don’t know how to finish this. I don’t think I want to finish this, because normally when you finish a letter you can just take it up to the owlery and mail it, and instead I’m stuck here and there’s no Hedwig waiting to fly off to the burrow and

Fuck it Ron, I miss—

—

“Incendio.”

—

The following week turned out to be a long one. Harry did not make it down to the Great Hall at all—it wasn’t that he was avoiding it, it was how busy he had become. Severus and Harry agreed not to try get legilimency to work until the holidays, but that was more because neither of them could hope to fit it in anytime sooner, not with Severus’s continued commitment to testing Harry’s sensing and Harry’s struggle to finish his translation, keep up with classes and the endless piles of homework McGonagall, in particular, was providing, and read everything he could find about seers. Pandora’s brand of divination, if you could still call it that when it was the real deal, seemed to be the only hint he had to a new path forward in his research. As he finished up translating the journal (which, like most works that had some promise in time magic, ended without clear conclusion), he knew that he could either write the OMRL to pass him along another journal to be labored over without promise of any useful answers, or he could get to work trying to construct something on his own. Since he had no clue how to even start on that, despite having the journal, the records of a muggleborn experimenter’s work and methodology to reference, he turned to this alternative research.

As Hector had warned, the literature on seers was frustratingly wishy-washy. The first book he
found, *Awakened: The Inner Eye*, was closer to a religious pamphlet forced on unwitting victims leaving a tube station than a respectable text. But at Hector’s suggestion, he found another book tucked away—a critical examination of fields of divination and their tendency to gather charlatans.

According to the book, seers and prophets were simultaneously the most reliable sources of information about the future and the most likely to be misunderstood. As Pandora had tried to explain, it seemed that seers saw the endless possibilities of the world, whereas prophets dealt with set points. They were both limited by their methods: a seer could rarely make predictions for certain, unless all of their views of the future were leading to a set point, and a prophet received their glimpses of the future without context or consequence, meaning a prophecy rarely played out the way it was interpreted to. It was described in the book as paths and points, but when boiled down to it, a prophet summoned fate, while a seer focused on choice and possibility.

Skeptical as Harry was of divination, he was intrigued by the implications. After all, he had spent so long unsure of whether or not his presence in the past was destroying his future, and the thought that some things were fixed came as a surprising comfort. The balance between the two had just enough certainty to make studying the future worthwhile, but otherwise allowed for a looseness… a sort of limited free will.

Harry found himself tentatively hopeful of the possibility that there were fixed points in his past-future. He knew there was at least one: in his third year he had witnessed Trelawny make an actual, Merlin-true Prophecy. *It will happen tonight. The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless…* the words were burned into his memory. And if that were a set point, then it meant that no matter what he did in the past, Voldemort would still fall between now and then, and Pettigrew would still be disguised as Scabbers.

Tentatively hopeful. He still couldn’t afford to be reckless.

*An Extended History of Time and Other Subtle Changes*, handy as ever in the spot Harry had coaxed the library into believing was the proper home for the book (the shelf right beside his usual haunt, otherwise filled with books about ghosts, spirits, and apparitions), seemed to share his cautious optimism. While it only allowed a half-page for discussion on implications about time travel, as the author preferred to chronicle to historical facts and legends than linger on discussions of time itself, it did come annotated with the recommendation of the work of one Anant Anand. The name sounded familiar, but Madame Pince had reported the Hogwarts library had none of his work in its collection. So, shrinking the journal and his translation notes to fit into a regular envelope, he wrote to Oxford, hoping the librarians would find what he needed and allow it to him at Hogwarts.

It was in the owlery that Isis found him, flapping her wings and squawking irritably. He winced, quickly giving her one of the owl treats he had scavenged, wondering how long she had been up here. Then he called Hani to ask her to bring up some mice, and she set into her feast, seeming torn between glaring at Harry and expressing her gratitude.

Harry tied off his package to one of the larger school owls before he removed the scroll from her leg. It was probably a strategy of some sort, not including an envelope—the papers stretched flat as soon as he undid the twine. The first page, Voldemort’s letter, was exceptionally brief, especially in comparison to the one from the week before.

*Young Mr. Harrigan,*

*I am afraid your correspondence was impossible to decipher, so I have returned it with some basic edits. The next version, I expect to be legible in both grammar and script. Do not waste my time.*
An interesting note: you have no records at St. Mungo’s. The healers suggested that with a vial of blood it could be determined whether you match one of their birth records. I had half a thought to send someone to check their records directly, but the hospital’s filing system is notoriously complex, so if your charts have merely been misfiled, they could be anywhere.

Or have you not received your inoculations? I would not be surprised, as you seem unbothered by putting your friends in danger.

V

Harry scowled, both at the ‘note’ and at the returned letter, which had been marked up in red ink like a failed potions essay. He stuck out his arm for Isis, and took her with him back to Ravenclaw tower, where he dug in his trunk until he recovered a ballpoint pen and tore a scrap of lined notebook paper from the spiral bound muggle’s notebook he had used for divination notes in the nineties, and wrote:


Isis gave him a mournful look as he tied the poorly rolled paper. Sighing, he stroked her neck, which she appreciated enough to tilt her head fully the other way, giving him better access through her heavy down. “You think you could do me a favor and peck his eyes out?” he asked as he went to unlatch the window.

The owl actually looked like she was considering it before her face fell back into her lopsided, judging glare. He offered her one last owl treat before he stepped back, letting out a sigh as she took off out the window.

All this interaction was reminding him of Hedwig. Though Harry had only met Isis a handful of times, already he was getting used to her, picking up on her personality, reading her expressions with relative ease. But she wasn’t his owl, and her master was none other than the asshole who would kill his parents and try to kill him—twice. He wanted to be home, with Hedwig, and the friends who didn’t drag him off to Death Eater meetings or try to test him magic vigorously.

Severus, however, was persistent. As Harry made his way towards the kitchens to grab dinner before starting his homework for the evening, he was located and rerouted into an empty classroom, where Severus stood with a triumphant look on his face.

"I have a theory," he said, pulling out his wand.

Harry sighed. He was still in the low mood thoughts of the nineties left him in, an irritation against Voldemort was burning in his gut. "Do we have to test it now?"

"It will only take a minute. Now shush."

Walking in a circle, Severus began chanting a ward Harry didn't know. He was very thorough, sealing it over Harry's head and under his feet through the floor, and when Harry pointed out a weak spot in the web-like shell wrapped around him, he redoubled it there.

"Alright," Severus said when he was satisfied. "Now turn around, and show me when you can sense magic."
Harry complied. He was used to this sort of testing by now. It reminded him rather of the way muggles tested hearing: raise your hand when you hear the beep. Severus waited a minute before casting the usual spark charm silently, but then it was a steady stream of spells.

Eventually, Severus gave up, disassembling the ward with a frown. "Apparently I was wrong," he grumbled. "So much for that."

Harry shook his head thoughtfully. It was obvious that Snape was trying to figure out whether he could feel magic through a ward, and while that one hadn't worked… "I think I know where you are going, but it would have to be a more specific—what sort of ward was that?"

"A basic barrier. I wouldn't have been able to step through."

"Too physical," Harry said. "It would have to be one specifically blocking magic. Not spells, but magic… from both sides."

"Why both sides?"

Harry shrugged. "Wouldn't want to risk my magic going out and then being separated from it."

"I thought you couldn't sense your own magic."

"Exactly; and even if I could I'd have no was of stopping it, really." While magic was loosely bound to a body, it wasn't usually as contained as Severus's was, and Severus reportedly had no conscious awareness of how he kept his in check. "Interesting idea," Harry mused.

It stuck around on the edge of his thoughts the whole evening, though it is not until the next morning that he remembers the 'Null Room' at St. Mungo’s that he read about that summer. While the idea that sensing magic might drive him insane enough to be locked up in a small room forever was just as unsettling as it was that summer, he still made time to hurry to the library before classes the next morning, quickly navigating the stacks to find a book on St. Mungo’s, scarce as those were outside of the medical shelves in the restricted section.

It gave him answers, though not complete ones: the room was apparently sealed off through a complicated runic ward system, but it didn't go into details. Still, he checked out the book and brought it along to Runes class, hanging back after class to ask Professor Notaro if she knew any books that might go into it.

She peered down at the book curiously, pulling her spectacles from where they rested in her salt and pepper hair and waving her wand towards the chalkboard, clearing away the day’s notes. Several pieces of white chalk floated up to make rapid marks, which came together into a simple diagram of a square room, layered with shorthand rune systems Harry recognized but did not understand.

“Well,” Notaro said with bemusement, looking up at him from her page. “You simply dive into the most complex versions of whatever you’re interested in, don’t you? You’re done with your codex project, then?”

“For now,” said Harry. “I sent it off to the OMRL last night, so I’m not sure if they’ll accept it or not.”

“They’ll accept it, I’m sure. Work like that—well, if you’re interested in it and good enough, you’ll never be out of demand. This, however… an interesting concept."

She regarded the drawing for a moment, before snagging one of the pieces of floating chalk and drawing an ‘O’ in front of where the door had been indicated, just outside of the ‘room’. ‘They
would have to put the keystone outside of the main room, since it would be a source of magic itself, and fold the ward over on itself through the door…” She demonstrated. “The edges would have to go through the crack in the door, because they wouldn’t be able to risk any of the building’s magic getting through, so it would have to be put on the surface of the stone…”

“ Aren’t spell circles normally drawn on the surface of the walls anyways?” Harry asked. He didn’t know much about wards, as they hadn’t properly gotten to that in the class yet, but for the most part, runes were etched on or into the surface of the space that they were activating their spell in. Notaro only seemed to be half listening, as she was making additional marks on the drawing he did not know how to interpret and she did not explain, but she did answer him.

“In general, yes, but a master ward—and this would be the work of a ward master, or a very determined practitioner—can settle the runes inside things. Such as inside the stones of a wall. It makes it more difficult for a ward breaker to analyze, and master wards often have clauses written in, that they must be disassembled in a specific order or secondary defenses will activate.”

“Well, it’s not likely that someone inside the Null Room would want to disrupt the wards. It’s not like a cage trapping them in or anything; it’s a medical recovery space.”

“No, I suppose not,” she said, but still she looked thoughtful as she stepped back to examine the diagram. A moment later she shrugged, closed the book, and passed it back to Harry, coming to sit back at her desk. “Well, I can’t say I’ve read them myself, but there are a few more detailed texts on the various medical spaces of St. Mungo’s in the restricted section. I’ll write you a pass if you would like to look into them further; can’t say I’m not curious myself.”

“Please; thank you.”

“Yes, well.” She fussed in her desk drawer until she found the appropriate form. “Just don’t you go trying anything without reviewing with me first, hm? I know you’re friends with Mr. Snape. Brilliant spellcrafter he may be, his experimental methods are far to reckless.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Severus, it turned out, was just as enthusiastic about Harry’s research into the Null Room as he was, though that was more because Harry had an open pass to the restricted section with it. “You are going to bring me a book of healing charms,” he declared when Harry had explained. “They keep everything related to medical magic locked up in there; can’t even learn to seal a scratch without a pass.”

Harry doubted that Severus was looking to seal scratches (something he knew that Severus was already more than capable of doing, since the boy’s occasionally explosive experiments in potions and spellcrafting would have him running to Madame Pomphrey every ten minutes if he wasn’t able to heal himself) but there was a book of healing charms right next to the one about St. Mungo’s, and they were enough on the same subject that Pince was not surprised when he brought them up together to check out. The pair left to avoid being spotted the librarian’s hawkish eyes, and settled up in the study room near Ravenclaw tower. Harry would be meeting with the Study Group there in an hour anyways, and Severus couldn’t risk being caught with the book checked out to Harry’s name without both of them getting in trouble, so they settled in: Harry immersed in analyzing the patterns
used to block magic from passing through and Severus flipping through the pages of his new toy.

"Aha!" Severus said at last. "Here we go."

"What?"

"I've found the spell Healers use to visualize magic, when they're working on critical patients or tricky curses or whatever." Severus stood up from his seat in the corner, passing the book over.

"I'm... not sure this is exactly what I am doing, you know," Harry pointed out, scanning the page with skepticism. "I'm not... seeing magic."

"Yes, yes, you've made that clear. But you should try it anyways, to see if there's similarities."

"Alright." Harry carefully marked the page of his book with a scrap of parchment and stood up, studying the description. When he was certain he had the method clear in his mind, he gave his wand the appropriate wavering gesture. "Pracantario aparecium."

The spell burst from his walls and filled the room. It was like a black light—wherever there was magic, it lit up, visible to Harry even though Severus's robes and the stone. It was terribly messy, what with all the residual magic in the room. Perhaps he had put too much power, or not focussed enough, as he hadn't had a target in mind.

Severus was intrigued, looking down at his glowing hands with an impressed expression, but Harry's face must have shown his differing opinion. "Well?" he asked.

Harry sighed. "It's like... looking at the lyrics of a song."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"This is a... logical visualization of magic, yes. If you want to try to place magic physically, I guess this would be a way to do so."

"You don't think this is, well, brilliant?"

Harry shrugged. "I mean, sure. It's probably really useful for healers, or, it would be, if they could focus the spell. But it's not magic you're looking at, its shiny lights indicating where magic is."

"Hm." Severus looked back down at himself, then back to Harry. "What's going on with yours? Is it the spell?"

Harry blinked. He hadn't thought about using this as a means to look at himself. He dug in his bag for some parchment and transfigured it into a mirror, holding it up.

His magic was... well, he couldn't be entirely sure that this visualization corresponded to the way he experienced the world at all, but if it did and he was looking at it right, his magic was somewhere between Dumbledore's, curious and reaching out to analyze everything around him, and Pandora's, spread out and seeming to fade into the area around him. But when he looked closer, it wasn't a mist, it was—it was like thousands of tiny threads reaching out into the world around them. He could follow several, faint as they were, to where they ran into Severus, and seemed to wrap themselves around him several times.

"Holy shit," Harry breathed.

“What?”
“I think that’s—I think I understand what’s—that’s my magic!”

“Harry?” asked Severus. Growing concerned when Harry just continued to stare, he took a cautious step forward, and Harry’s face lit up in fascinated delight as the barely-there threads of his magic shifted with Severus, whose magic was so contained to his body. “What are you—”

“I understand.” Harry said. He reached out tentatively, wanting to touch the strands of light, but then got distracted staring at his hand.

“Harry!”

Harry glanced up, but he couldn’t quite wipe the smile from his face, even though Severus was looking like he was scared he’d unwittingly led Harry down into another unexpected mental danger zone. “I—my magic is how I’m sensing everything. See how it’s going, well, everywhere? It’s like—oh, I wonder if Dumbledore and Slughorn can sense magic, then. Not like this, but—their magic is always reaching out, curious—and that’s why I can’t sense my own magic; I can’t see my own eyes—it’s—”

“What the hell?”

The two boys started, turning to find Lily in the door, green eyes wide as she took in the room lit up with strange lights. Severus shrunk back, but Harry, caught up in his excitement, grinned. He’d noticed before that Lily had ‘curious’ magic as well. “Perfect!” he said, dropping the transfigured mirror onto his bag. “Turn around and close your eyes.”

“Um. Harrigan?” Lily asked, alarmed by his enthusiasm. Almost unwillingly, her eyes went to Severus, but the Slytherin boy just shrugged.

“I’m not going to hex you,” Harry insisted. “Just—please?”

Lily frowned, but turned around.

“Are your eyes closed?”

“Yes…”

“Okay, then—just tell me if you notice anything.” He focused, casting _lumos_ silently, as Professor Burke had taught them, and waited for a moment. He could feel a bit of Lily’s magic reaching out towards the spell, but Lily didn’t say anything. After a moment, he channeled more energy into the spell, increasing the brightness of the spell while the extra magic spread out around it, and Lily’s magic seemed to take more interest, stretching out—

“Are you casting something on me?”

Harry grinned and canceled the spell. “How could you tell?”

“It just—can I turn around?”

“Yes.”

“It just felt like it.” She looked at him suspiciously. “You said you weren’t going to hex me.”

“Just a _lumos_,” Harry reassured her, his smile redoubled now that his theory was confirmed.

“Wait,” said Severus, catching up. “Are you saying that she…”
“Yup,” said Harry. “It’s not the same, but…”

“How can she, if I can’t?”

“She is standing right here, you know,” Lily said, her voice coming out rather coldly.

“Sorry,” Harry apologized, knowing Severus wouldn’t. “We’re working on an experimental charm, and it’s kind of a mess, that’s what all these lights are.”

“Huh,” said Lily. “Well, can you cancel it? It’d be awfully hard to study with all the… shiny.”

Harry nodded and cast a \textit{finite}, and all three watched, transfixed, as the lights faded away. At the exact same time, Severus and Lily seemed to remember they were in the same room, and glanced at each other, only to quickly look away.

“James is joining us again today,” Lily said after a moment, looking at Harry but clearly talking to Severus. “He should be here any minute.”

To his left, Harry felt Severus bristle, and quickly turned. “Sev. You should probably get going, unless you want to hang around.” The other boy’s nostrils flared, but he nodded, and stiffly collected his bag from the corner, leaving without so much as a word to either of them.

After a few moments, Lily sighed. “He’s such a handful,” she said.

“You’ve got that right,” Harry agreed. He re-transfigured the mirror back into parchment and put the book of healing charms into his bag. The silence between them was a bit uneasy, but the Floyd and Kirke showed up with an uncomfortable looking James in tow, and Harry let them chat, diving back into the description of the Null Room wards without anyone being too bothered.

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Things were looking up for Harry: when he entered the Great Hall on Thursday morning, there was no Ural owl waiting with unwanted mail from Voldemort. Perhaps he had finally gotten the message that Harry wanted nothing to do with him or his politics. It was unlikely—rudeness is not actually an effective means of defense against a Dark Lord, no matter enthusiastically Harry attempted to make it one—but the prospect of getting through an entire meal in the Hall without having to hide a letter from Hector and Pandora was a comforting relief.

Pandora, as usual, was already at her spot in the Great Hall with a cup of tea when Harry reached the table. She started to put her book away when she saw him, but he waved at her to stop. “I’m just going to pull out my own,” he said. “Hector woke up late, but \textit{demanded} I be here, reading or not.”

So the pair of Ravenclaws sat in companionable silence, bent over their separate books and slowly working through their meals. It was not an unusual sight at the Ravenclaw table, and no one bothered them, at least until Hector came hurrying into the room. Harry had to shield his book from the water that flicked off his hair when he sat down.

“Sorry about that.”

“Why don’t you just use a drying charm?” Harry asked.
Hector looked mortified. “I would never do that to my hair! Come to think of it—is that why your hair is always so… so…”

“So what?”

“Bed-head chic,” Pandora offered, not looking up from her book.

“Exactly.”

Harry frowned. “No, my hair’s just like that. Are drying charms not good for hair, or something? Everyone else I know uses them…”

“Well, you knew what—ten wizards before coming here?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s just like using a blow-dryer. Only faster, and more convenient.”

“If you don’t care that your head looks like a newly-hatched baby owl, sure,” Hector huffed. He started serving himself breakfast, and, as was his habit, doubled the amount of food on Harry’s plate in the process. Harry wondered if that was a cultural thing or a Hector thing, but it never seemed the right time to ask. Even now, as Hector sat back down, tearing a croissant in half and splitting it between Harry and Pandora, he was already going on: “What are you reading?”

“Runes stuff,” said Harry, and explained the concept of the Null Room.

“That would be dead useful in a fight,” Hector commented, eyes sharp as he considered it. “It would be like an anti-apparition ward, a containment ward, and a spell block all at once. You just have to get the enemy inside…”

“Heh, I suppose. I was thinking more for medical use? If you could make a version that only covers the patient, so it moves with them… a sort of skin-tight ward. Then they could at least go about their daily lives as normal—well, as normally as muggles.”

He didn’t mention that it would be serving him, but the point stood.

Hector laughed. “Yes, I suppose that is more practical. It couldn’t be done like a normal defensive object? A ring or something?”

“Too complex,” said Harry. “And those usually only work a handful of times before they give out. This would be blocking against all magic, all the time. I mean, look at the circle’s diagram.”

They studied it together. A normal spell circle was a chain of runes connected into an infinite loop, which detailed the spell through a combination of the meaning of the individual runes and the ‘words’ they formed—not as actual, phonetically reasonable words, but as chain patterns that came to represent certain meanings. Each rune had several levels of meaning to it, and the meaning within the spell depended on position within the circle, the ‘word’, the relative size (for the runes were
actually written, and size could be used as a means of power), repetition, and the spellwriter’s intent. Mistaking a single rune could render the entire spell useless, although once the circle was completed, the spell either had to be taken down in a specific way, which was part of what curse breakers were trained to do, or overpowered, which was a generally ill-advised method of dealing with them as the release of magic could be quite explosive.

While referred to as ‘circles’, spells came in a variety of shapes, two and three dimensional, which could be altered to cover unusually shaped objects. The shape did affect the function of a spell, so a spell written on an object that corresponded geometrically to the diagram would make a successful casting easier, but there was intent to prevent the method from being too restrictive. The only absolute rule was that any chains of runes had to be ‘closed circuits’, so to speak. Often spells were situated around a single focusing rune in the center of the circle, but any shapes had to be complete, or when activated the magic would run through once and then leave the broken circle. That could be dangerous as well—if the caster tried to activate an incomplete circle, a powerful one could drain all their magic, and even a simple one could exhaust the caster before they could cut the spell off.

This circle that warded the Null Room was a quite complicated one. Geometrically, the shape was a double-ringed circle, connected by several smaller circles that, in the three-dimensional application, would intersect the two rings in pairs. As such, where a simple spell could be etched into a band ring or bracelet, which would form a circle around it’s intended subject (the person who wore it) and the effect would apply to the whole body, this was rather too restrained about how it had to be laid out for that to work. When warding a room, the runes would be written in the air and the location constrained by relative position to the earth, rather than etched into an object like a portable version would be.

“Oh!” said Hector after a few minutes. “I’ve got it.”

“Hm?”

“Prayer beads. You know, like the ones I’ve got on my desk? Those aren’t magic, just a muggle religious thing, but the form would work.”

“Can you show me?”

“Now?” Hector laughed when Harry immediately stood. “At least finish your breakfast.”

“Er, right,” said Harry. He sat down again, tucking away his book. As he shoveled down the piles of eggs and potatoes Hector had heaped onto his plate, he looked up to find Pandora considering him pensively. “...what?”

She pointed to her lip. Harry frowned, and brushed his own, only to find a chunk of egg coming away on his fingers. “Ick,” he said, but went back to eating. Progress on this project was more important than his disgust.

“Are you going to Creatures today, Pandora?” Hector asked.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Harry frowned. He wasn’t taking Care of Magical Creatures at NEWT level (he hadn’t even taken it in his repeat fifth year, nor had he sat the OWL), but both Hector and Pandora were taking it, along with Runes and, in Hector’s case, Arithmancy. “Why wouldn’t you go?” he asked.

“There’s a representative from the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures coming,” Pandora said, a bit stiffly. “Recruiting.”
“Oh,” said Harry, though that didn’t really clear anything up for him.

“They were the ones who pushed for the bill loosening the laws on independent creature regulation.”

“Independent creature regulation?”

“It’s in the same vein as the Use of Magic Bill,” Hector explained, sounding rather grim. “In theory, it’s a good thing… the regulations aren’t exactly fair towards creatures or half-creatures. But it also means that some of the protections are lifted…”

“I’m surprised Hani hasn’t mentioned it to you, Harry,” Pandora said. “After all, the new bill likens house elves to the same as, say, livestock.”

“What?”

“You can’t be put on trial for murdering or harming an elf anymore. Well, the bonded family can sue for destruction of property, but that’s hardly…”

“It’s revolting, is what it is,” said Hector. And then his look turned on Harry, expecting. Challenging. Harry was startled. Hector hadn’t tried to get him to make his stance in political situations known since their conversation on Halloween. This, however… It had to be changed by the nineties, or Hermione would have told them all about it, wouldn’t she? “It is,” he agreed darkly. “You mean to say that if someone were to murder Hani, they wouldn’t…”

“Dumbledore would bring them to trial,” Pandora said firmly. “He’s a good influence. Were that he sat on the Wizengamot…”

“He doesn’t?” Harry frowned. He had seen Dumbledore’s pensieve memories of the Death Eater trials, and Dumbledore had definitely held a seat. Not to mention that he was the Chief Warlock up until 1995, not that Harry really knew what that meant. He’d only researched the general functions of the Government in his reading spree, after all.

“The Dumbledore seat went to the Seats of the Elect back when he was a kid. Some family trouble… they gave it up willing, to confirm their stance as Libs, I suppose,” said Hector.

Harry laughed, glancing at the head table. Dumbledore was, as usual, absent from his seat. “Does anyone really need Dumbledore to confirm he’s a Lib?”

“He’s not, though. Not really,” Pandora said. “He doesn’t have, well, any ties to either of the parties or any of the usual Departments or their coalitions. It makes people nervous.”

“And it’s Dumbledore,” said Hector. “I don’t think they could pin him down with a permanent sticking charm. And he’s not even officially involved with the ministry.”

“Not officially?”

“There’s been talk of ousting the Minister. Again.” Hector shrugged, taking the last bite of his piece of toast. “Even if he would take the position, which he’s said over and over again he won’t, he has enough enemies that it would be an… explosive transition, to say the least.”

“That’s what they want,” Pandora murmured. She glanced down the table, and Harry found Crouch Jr. standing near the front, chatting easily with several of his Slytherin year mates (Regulus included) before they all sat down at their appropriate tables. “Crouch and Bagnold are pushing for policies that will force people to take sides. Not Lib versus Lit sides, but war sides.”
Harry winced, setting down his fork. Even as frustrating as it was that the Ministry of the seventies was just as insistent on denying that the Death Eaters were anything more than a group of rogue pranksters, even the Daily Prophet was calling them terrorists, these days. With Voldemort’s curious absence from the papers, there was nothing for the public to really rally against, as muggle-baiting was highly illegal but not unusual, and the Death Eaters hadn’t made any claims or demands, at least publicly. Once Voldemort came into the game beyond whispers of the next Grindelwald, Harry was certain the ministry would take its stand against him. They had to—he knew it, knew they’d fought back against Voldemort in the first war, even if it hadn’t been entirely effective.

And it had taken his parents’ deaths and some magical accident to end it.

“I’m done eating,” he said, knowing it was an abrupt transition. He glanced at Hector’s plate. It was nearly empty. “Will you show me the prayer beads?”

Hector glanced between Harry and Pandora, but the witch was already picking up her book again, so he shrugged. “Sure, I guess. You’ll probably have to show them to Professor Notaro. She’d know if it was worth pursuing or not.”

When he brought the idea up to her after his next class, Professor Notaro did think the idea was worth pursuing, and more than that, she invited Harry to try. “Not with that ward, my dear,” she said when Harry looked surprised that she would suggest something so powerful. “Perhahps something simpler? If you are successful, and I don’t see why not, we may be able to swing a properly written paper on the matter to cover for your OWLs, and get you moved up to the NEWT class…”

“Really?” Harry said, dumbfounded. “But… I’ve only been studying for a year…”

“And you’re already doing translation for the OMRL.”

“That’s just busy work, really, ma’am. Just decoding old journals… not even proper spell work.”

“You’ve mastered the main alphabets and multiple variations, and you’ve applied it practically, which is more than most of your peers will ever do, I’m afraid. Don’t discredit yourself, dear boy!” She smiled at him, dark eyes twinkling behind her glasses in an almost Dumbledore-like manner. “And from what I’ve seen the last few weeks, you’re taking to spell circles like a fish to water.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. The only times he ‘took’ to something, it usually ended up hurting him. He was only a parseltongue because of Voldemort was, after all, and only able to sense magic because—well, he didn’t know why, exactly, but he knew it was far more trouble than it was worth. Which was why he was pursuing this whole study, in any case. Well, that and time travel, but he doubted he would be able to get to the future by way of a personalized ward.

“You really think I could get something like this to work?” he asked.

“We’ll be doing basic object enchantments to start January, in either case. If you’d rather wait, I suppose I have no business pushing you towards a more daring project, but it is disappointing to have a student working so far behind his ability.” She picked up the beads from her desk, where they were resting beside the book open to the spell diagram. “These are really amazingly suited towards that spell. I imagine for others you could revise the shape of the beads.”
“Hector was the one who thought of it,” Harry said quickly.

“Yes, you’ve said. Mr. Smithe… well, I don’t think he would be ambitious enough to take on a project like this. This has potential.” She met Harry’s eyes with a smile almost like a smirk. “No, I think your friend Mr. Snape would be better suited towards helping you with this one. So long as you do not activate the spell until I have cleared it. Do you have any thoughts as to what sort of ward you would like to try?”

Harry considered that. From what he’d read over the past few days, in his rush to understand the Null Room, wards were usually quite specific to the location they were intended to be protecting. That was what defined them as a class of magic, after all. Applying the charms of a place to a single person… he could see that such work could have use in battles, as Hector had implied. Harry would rather not delve into that, not when he was trying so hard to stay out of the conflict. When he got back to the nineties, he would have to suggest it to Hermione, who would doubtless have ideas of applications that could help them.

For now, though, he shook his head. Professor Notaro looked somewhat disappointed. “Well, I can point you to a few books, though I should think there is plenty of inspiration all around you, considering.”

“Considering?”

“We are at Hogwarts!” she said with a laugh. “There’s no place in Europe so heavily warded. This was a magical place before the castle was even built, after all, and then the founders came along and sunk the standing stones, and, well, the rest is…” She cut herself off to wave about the room. Harry, however, was even more confused.

“Standing stones?”

For a moment, Notaro’s face was slack with confusion, then she laughed again, setting down the beads and sitting down at her desk. “I forget you were muggle-raised, Mr. Harrigan. And without much wizarding cultural experience?”

“Before Hogwarts, nothing, really,” Harry admitted. It wasn’t even a lie, and complied with his fictional background.

“A shame. And Cuthbert won’t have resolved that?”

“Cuthbert?”

“Professor Binns,” Notaro clarified.

“Oh, um.” Harry again felt uncomfortable. “If he did, I wouldn’t have caught it, and I’m not taking History anymore.”

“Well, he is rather goblin-obsessed,” Notaro said dryly. “Can hardly blame him, considering…”

“Um,” said Harry. He was entirely out of his element here. Notaro laughed, though less at his lack of eloquence and more at the confusion written clearly off of her student’s face.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m not helping. Back to the point. Before Hogwarts was built, there was a ring of standing stones around the lake and the forest. These originally served as anchors for a spell to keep the fae contained, as the forest was once rife with them and there was no Ministry to form alliances. You might call it a ward, but wards as we know them are much different from how they were then. We can’t even be sure who raised them, though there is speculation—and the usual
attribution to druids—but by the time the founders came to the site, the fae were a much less prevalent threat, either because of the stones or because they had broken them, so the magic was weak. When the founders came, they raised the castle within the borders of the wards, and set about repairing and updating them, using the stones as anchors for more modern spell techniques. Then they sunk the standing stones into the earth, making the wards that much more permanent. The keystone—literally a stone, in this case—remains standing, but it’s location is as closely guarded a secret as, say, the location of the Chamber of Secrets. That’s—well, I suppose you don’t have to know much about that one to get the point.”

Harry nodded, never mind that he had found the Chamber of Secrets, and its location would be relatively common knowledge by 1993. “They warded the whole forest?” he asked instead, rather in wonder at the amount of magic that would take. No wonder passing through the wards had such an effect on his magic sensing.

“An impressive feat, for four people. They had others to help raise the castle, brought in help from the village that eventually became Hogsmeade, but some of the stones required travel through the forest, which had grown since the stones had broke. Locals wouldn’t go through.” She frowned. “You should read about this, you know, not take my word for it. I’m hardly the History professor.”


“That would be an ideal source, yes,” Notaro agreed, not picking up on his sarcasm, or the pain in his face as he thought of Hermione. “It would have details about the wards here, as well, for inspiration.” She gestured to the prayer beads and the project at hand. “Of course it would be a less powerful version, unless you were going to spend years charging each of the beads with magic individually, but the Hogwarts wards have several layers. Anti-apparition, anti-muggle notice-me-nots, and unplottable wards chief among them.”

Harry considered that. “The notice-me-nots might be useful. I mean, most wizards are pretty obvious, when it comes to trying to blend in with muggles.”

“Well, you don’t have to decide right away,” said Notaro, though she looked pleased. “However, if you are able to make a functioning version by the holidays, we can see about getting a write-up done and you caught up to your classmates in the NEWT level over the holidays.”

“If you really think I could,” he said, still not entirely convinced.

“I—”

But she was cut off by the bell before she could finish, and both of them jumped. “Merlin, Mr. Harrigan,” she said. “You had better get to class. What is it? Potions?”

“Charms,” said Harry, shoving the book back into his bag.

“I’ll write you a note. But let me know next class!”

At breakfast that Friday, there was a slight commotion at the Slytherin table. Several of the upper years had nearly fallen out of their seats, and everyone could see why: an eagle—an actual golden eagle—had come in with the other birds, though the owls steered clear of it. Harry held back a laugh:
who delivered mail with an eagle?

Then it landed in front of him, and Harry knew who.

This was not the patient, sleepy-eyed Isis who had delivered the previous letters. It thrust its leg out, staring as though to dare Harry to try *not* to take the long, narrow package secured to it. Harry’s hands were shaking badly enough he could barely get the knot undone, knowing he was being watched, knowing that Hector, frozen with a slice of toast halfway to his mouth, could see every tremble, and Pandora, with her gift, must know what it contained. He didn’t yet, but somehow he knew—this was a warning.

The older Slytherins, at least, seemed to know exactly who the bird was from, and several of them huddled together whispering furiously, staring at him all the while. He was facing their table, his back to the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, but he could hear the murmurs and laughter behind him, and he would have been red to the ears if he hadn’t already gone pale. When he managed to get the package off, the eagle nipped at his finger, drawing blood, before they all had to duck out of the way as it spread its wings to take flight again.

“Harry?” Hector muttered. “What the hell…?”

Harry glanced towards the head table, pleased to find that only Professor Flitwick was on duty. He didn’t know much about the Charms professor, but Flitwick hadn’t been in the Order of the Phoenix and had defied McGonagall in arguing Harry’s right to go to Hogsmeade. If he knew who the eagle was coming from, he wouldn’t give Harry any grief about it, he hoped. As it was, Flitwick seemed caught up in conversation with two of the younger students, and not paying any mind to the coming and going of the golden eagle.

Because he was turned towards the head table, he did not see whoever came up behind him and grabbed him by the shoulder, yanking him out of his seat, but Harry had his hand on his wand and a spell on his lips before he managed to recognize the magic of his assailant. It was Severus, a peculiar expression caught between fury and worry on his pale face, and Harry stumbled to his feet, trying to keep up with Severus’s near-run out of the Great Hall, but he wasn’t really able to get his balance until Severus practically threw him into the desks in an empty classroom, sealing the door locked three different ways and then casting that horrible-feeling *muffliato* spell behind him.

“What the hell is that?” Severus demanded when he spun around again, gesturing at the package clenched tightly in Harry’s hand.

“I haven’t opened it yet—”

“Why is *he* writing to you? Was he the one sending that owl?”

“I—hang on, what do you know about that?”

“You never get mail. I should have known; it started after the meeting but you didn’t—*don’t open it!*”

Harry jumped as Severus practically shrieked, dropping the package on the floor between them. “Merlin, Sev,” Harry said. “Do you want to know, or not?”

“It could be cursed,” Severus breathed, jabbing his wand in its direction. “You weren’t exactly ingratiating yourself at the meeting… what has he been writing you about? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Harry rolled his eyes. In a way, Severus’s explosive temper was helping, pushing out the irrational fear the arrival of the eagle had inspired. “It’s not cursed,” he said, picking the package up. “I would
be able to tell if there were any magic on it, and there’s a bit, but hardly enough for a curse.” He moved to break the spellotape holding the brown paper closed, ignoring Severus’s frantic shout of *wait!* and revealing the contents.

A moment later, he wished he hadn’t.

Paler and shaking again, he picked up the feather that had been contained inside. It was striped brown and white, and the tip had been fitted with a bronze nib, complete with some sort of spell—self-inking or spelling or the something small and similar. It would have been a lovely quill, if the feather hadn’t so clearly belonged to Isis and the barbs not dotted with flaking red-brown spots of blood.

“A quill?” asked Severus, curiosity getting the best of him as he stepped forward. “Why would he send you a…” He must have spotted the blood, because he trailed off.

Harry thought he was going to be sick. Had Voldemort really—the owl had nothing to do with Harry’s rude responses! It was his damn owl—had he injured her? Killed her? She was the only reason why he’d responded at all, and now she… he carefully set the package aside on one of the desks.

It was only then that he noticed the note, and did his best to pluck it out of the paper without touching the feather. It was a strip of vellum, like many of the books found in the library and what they used for writing spell circles, folded twice into an open-ended square and sealed with a bit of wax that shocked Harry with a trapped bit of magic that darted away as soon as he opened it. Back to Voldemort, no doubt, who would now know that he had opened it. He hadn’t done that to the previous letters.

Inside Harry found four lines of the usual upright, elegant script:

> Perhaps a proper quill will
> assist you in forming
> a less dangerous response?

V

“Jesus,” Severus breathed, the unusual muggle curse falling from his lips as he craned his neck to read the cursive. “What did you write to him?”

When Harry didn’t respond, Severus grabbed him by the shoulder, using his other hand to push Harry’s drooping head back up to look him in the eye. “Harrigan, *tell me*. What does he want from you?”

“What do you care?” Harry mumbled, twisting his face out of Severus’s grasp. “You wanted me to take an interest, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t expect *him* to take an interest in you! And you know that. And…” Severus’s voice dropped a bit. “Harry, I know that I have a vested interest in the politics, and that… that keeps me safe. Safer than someone with no allegiance to anything. If he’s writing you directly…”

Harry flinched. “I didn’t want anyone to take interest in me. I wanted to stay out of it.”
“I know,” Severus said, clenching his jaw. “But if he’s… why has he been writing you? Is he… is he threatening you?”

“He is now,” Harry said, refusing to look at the quill.

“But why? What does he want?” When Harry didn’t answer immediately, Severus’s mind moved fast to try and answer his own question, and he froze. “Does he know about… your sensing?”

Harry shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Yet? You’re planning to tell him? Harry, that’s—”

“He’s been having me investigated,” said Harry, cutting Severus off.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He… wanted to know more about the scar I have, the one he saw—”

This time he couldn’t stop Severus before the Slytherin pushed his fringe up away from his face, revealing the thin white line nearly lost among the freckles. Harry flinched, but he could tell that Dumbledore’s disguising spell was holding true, and it wouldn’t be the tell-tale lightning bolt shape. “What’s so special about it?” Severus demanded.

“Nothing. It’s just a scar I’ve had since… forever.”

“He said it was a curse scar, on Halloween. Dark magic.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s just a scar to me, and I really didn’t have anything to say about it, when he first asked.”

“But he’s sent you two letters.”

“Three,” said Harry dully.

“What did the other two say?”

“The second was mostly reprimanding me for being rude—”

Severus groaned. “Of course you would be rude to the most powerful dark wizard in the world! You’re out of your bloody mind!”

“It was intentional,” Harry snapped. “He had no business asking me about something so personal, not when we’re—”

“He’s the bloody Dark Lord. You can’t just tell him no!”

“I can, I did, and I will,” Harry said firmly. But then he remembered the quill sitting by his hand, and the threats contained in the previous letters, and he flinched again. “Which. Um… I’m realizing might not have been the best strategy.”

“Oh, he admits it,” Severus muttered, throwing up his hands and turning to pace back and forth across the classroom. “What, exactly, was that ‘strategy’ of yours?”

“Tryimg to make myself someone not worth bothering with?”

Severus shot him a contemptuous look. “Well, clearly you have failed.”
“What was I supposed to do?”

“You could have asked me for help before you went around being purposefully rude to a Dark Lord!”

Harry raised his hands to his face, pushing up his glasses to press against his eyes with the heels of his hands. “And why exactly would I do that?”

“Because I understand the person you’re writing to—”

“You’re the reason he’s writing me in the first place!” He realized he was shouting, but for the moment he didn’t care. Bloody Lord Voldemort was threatening him and apparently killing owls to get to him, something that was affecting Harry far more than it probably should have, and this was not a situation Harry had imagined himself in. In the nineties, maybe, since Voldemort had wanted him dead since he was a baby, but now the only reason Voldemort even knew about him was because Severus and Regulus had somehow talked him going into a bloody Death Eater meeting, something Harry never would have done on his own.

“I didn’t think you’d freak out like you did!” Severus exclaimed. “You know why I asked you to come to the meeting—”

“I really don’t,” Harry snarled back, the blood pounding in his ears. “Except—to annoy me? To make me go against my own better judgment? To push me into a risky situation?”

“Harry, for fuck’s sake…”

But whatever he went on to say, Harry didn’t hear it, because he was suddenly finding it very hard to breathe and the classroom was tunneling before him so he squeezed his eyes shut and his ears were ringing and Voldemort killed Isis because of him —why did Voldemort kill Isis? She was his own owl—she wasn’t to blame for his inability to play Voldemort’s games—who would he kill next? He had people in the school—people watching Harry—who would he kill next? Or Regulus? Because of Harry—they were his but that didn’t mean they were safe if Isis wasn’t safe—why had Voldemort noticed him and the bloody scar, it was always the scar—he had killed Isis, he knew it —would he kill Harry too, if he got the chance? Would he never be able to return to the future, his disappearance unexplained, and Ron and Hermione left to fight back without him—and Voldemort would kill them too, he would kill all of them—

“Stupefy!”

Harry was thrown back across the desks, crashing into a chair that broke his fall but did not prevent his head from hitting hard on the stone floor, breaking through his gasps with a cry. Severus was standing over him in a heartbeat, jabbing his wand down and releasing some spell that Harry did not hear the words of, and the pain vanished, leaving Harry feeling suddenly very aware of the stillness and quiet of the classroom, and the shakiness of his breaths. He blinked several times, staring up at Severus’s dark-eyed, inscrutable expression, unreadable as ever. Then Severus leaned down and grabbed Harry’s arm, hauling him up, and walked Harry back over to where he’d been the moment before. When he released Harry’s arm, Harry leaned heavily against the desk, glancing up at him warily.

He’d stunned him. Severus had stunned him. He doubted that was a proper way of bringing someone out of a panic, but it had done the trick, and while Harry’s mind was still reeling, as long as he didn’t look at the package… didn’t think about the mess he had gotten himself into…

Yeah, it was hopeless.
“I shouldn’t have gone to the meeting,” he said hoarsely. Speaking, he felt like he had been throttled, but at least he was breathing.

“I’m beginning to agree,” said Severus darkly, but his ill intent did not seem directed towards Harry. Rather, he was clenching left hand into a fist, knuckles standing out sharp against the white skin, and Harry could only imagine there would be four red crescents stamped into his own palm once he let go. But when he spoke again, his voice was level. Calm. “You’re going to show me the letters. And we’ll figure out how to reply without you digging yourself any deeper.”

“Alright,” said Harry weakly, trying to sniff the snot threatening to drip out of his nose back up without being too loud. Severus gave Harry an expectant look that made him want to disappear into the darkness of his Hogwarts robes. “You mean… now?”

“The sooner the better, as far as I can tell.”

“But we have class,” Harry protested, even as he straightened and gathered the horrible package up, resealing the spellotape so no one else would see the quill.

“I’ll need time to consider various approaches; we’ll write the actual response this afternoon. And you’ll need your things from the dormitories for class anyways.”

Harry blinked, just now realizing that he had left his bag in the Great Hall. Hopefully Hector would grab it for him, and not ask too many questions about why Severus had dragged him off. Or about anything else, like the eagle. Or the Slytherins. Or—

God, Harry was fucked.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! It's been busy so far, especially with getting the other two stories started on posting last week (gosh are summaries and concise opening notes an art I have yet to master) but here we are. This one's for all y'all who were laughing over Voldemort's letters, yeah? (Although, to be fair, you might still be laughing. Voldy remains a drama queen and Harry continues to do himself no favors. Ah, well.)

On a different note, if my switch to bi-weekly posting is leaving you with oodles of free time every other Saturday, consider giving my friend Julis's story No Longer Will I Be Forsaken a read! It's been in progress for about as long as this story has and is finally being posted. Not a time travel fic, but features: Politics! Death Eaters! Nobility! and Regulus Black, as the Trying Very Hard main character.
http://archiveofourown.org/works/13236525/chapters/30277410

Thank you, as always, for your reviews. They add fuel to Harry's poor life decisions.
Twisted Versions of the Future-Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The letter Harry and Severus sent that evening, as constructed through several hours of debate and carefully rewrites and rewordings of the lies Harry was sticking to (not that Severus knew they were lies) and Harry’s flat-out refusal to use the gifted quill, despite Severus’s insistence that it would be better, tied to the foot of Regulus’s borrowed long-eared owl, and re-written again when Severus wasn’t looking, read:

Sir,

As requested, the results of the diagnostic analysis in Lysander’s Treatise, Vol 7: the scar indeed contains traces of magic which, as you have previously mentioned, seems to be of the dark variety. None of the side effects listed have ever been observed, aside from a most likely unrelated tendency for headaches, nor did any of the recommended diagnostic charms turn up any cognitive or otherwise less visible effects. By the book, the scar is nothing more than a spot where most likely ricocheted dark magic latched onto my body despite finding it an unsuitable host. Interesting, I suppose, to someone with an interest in such things, but not to me.

If it will satisfy your apparent curiosity, a story:

Muggles of the most mugglish sort were abruptly tasked with the care of an undocumented, impossible child following the deaths of his parents, who were themselves unwanted, unwelcome family. They did their best to raise the kid to be absolutely normal, kept far away from the dangerous influence of a culture foreign to their own. Like most muggle-raised children, his uncontrolled magic proved impossible for the muggles to handle, and since he was a half-blood, the ministry never sent help. While they refused to do something so unnatural as send the child to a magical school (having kept him safely away from magical society for so long), they sought an alternative means of teaching the child control through their one contact in the wizarding world, the then deputy headmaster of the school, Albus Dumbledore. Being the sort of person that he is, and since it would not have been smart to leave the muggleborns’ magic unchecked until he inevitably lost control in a more dramatic way and was forced to have his magic sealed (as is the ministry’s questionable practice) he called in a favor with an old friend, a man I only ever knew as the Professor.

The Professor was a member of an independent coven. I do not know how legal it was, since most covens refuse to bow to the leadership of the Ministry, but they were an exceptionally careful group who guarded their secrets closely, and I, as an outsider, was always seen as a weakness in the armor. Mostly, even if I wanted to share information, I would find it suddenly impossible to communicate. Writing this has pushed my limits already.

I can say that the Professor was an extremely thorough teacher who, despite his rejection of the ministry, saw fit to prepare myself and his handful of other students for the OWLs, knowing that if we wished to join society properly we would need to earn respectable marks. He, like me, was an outsider to the coven, except his circumstances were different in ways I can’t explain. After the
OWLs, he would have probably continued to teach me a handful of subjects, but if I’d wanted to pursue NEWTs, I would have had to seek additional education outside the coven, or study on my own.

Before I had to decide, there was a magical accident. I do not rightly know what happened, since I was unconscious for the majority of the event, and while I might have written more here, to satisfy your curiosity, I can’t. I do know the muggles listed the event as a ‘gas explosion’, and that there were fatalities and injuries, and that my muggle guardians were no longer capable of caring for me. The Professor was severely injured, and returned to the mainland to heal properly. He did not tell me where, though he had at one point attempted to teach me French, so I would guess that France is as likely as anywhere else. Before he left, he did contact Professor Dumbledore, who agreed that I could complete my OWLs at Hogwarts and, if I were interested in pursuing my NEWTs, remain on for the additional sixth form. Professor Dumbledore has proved invaluable in assisting me in finding a place in a new and relatively foreign culture including, as you have noted, assisting with making sure any paperwork necessary for a proper identity in wizarding society was retroactively completed, and using his contacts at the OMRL for me to earn a decent wage, once I’d proved my basic competence in Ancient Runes.

If you have further questions, I would prefer them directed to me, rather than squandering anyone else’s time digging up information about me in questionable ways. I am private, not secretive, aside from secrets that are not my own to give.

D. Harrigan

~

“But did we have to give him that much information?” Harry groaned as the pair descended the stairs from the owlery, after.

“For the last time, yes,” said Severus. “Keeping your life to yourself is less important than keeping your life, I hope you would have the sense to agree.”

“You really think he would kill me over an ‘impatient’ letter?”

“I called it impudent, not impatient, and, as a matter of fact, yes, seeing as you managed to piss him off bad enough that he attacked his own owl, I don’t think he would hesitate to kill you. Or, for that matter, me.”

Harry frowned, stepping off the stairs back into the castle proper and shutting the heavy wooden door behind him. Most of the other students were down in the Great Hall for dinner, so they were alone in their trek back downstairs. “Then why do you support him?”

“Practically speaking, he is the most powerful wizard in the world. Politically speaking, I agree with the group’s aims,” Severus said levelly, his voice dropping a bit despite their privacy. “And if it weren’t for your idiocy, I wouldn’t be in any danger at all.”

“And if it weren’t for yours, I wouldn’t even be involved,” Harry grumbled, but the effect was rather lost by the countless rehashing the pair had already devoted to that particular argument. He skipped pointing out that Dumbledore was stronger, too, because while he had faith in it, the fact remained: he’d never felt the full force of Dumbledore’s magic, so he had no real way to compare it to
Voldemort’s overwhelming presence. “And, politically speaking, they count you as something lesser. Because your dad was a—”

“You’re being ridiculous again,” Severus said, cutting him off. “It doesn’t matter where I go, I will always be counted as something lesser, because of my father.” He spat the title like it was a curse. “And I despise my father, and my mother for degrading herself with him, as much as the rest of them.”

“And what about me? I don’t hate my dad for being a muggle, or my mum for marrying him, or my aunt and uncle, for trying to keep me away from all of this.”

Severus paused. They had come to the moving staircases, and the platform they were standing at had no paths away from it, so they would have to turn around and take another route. For the moment they stood facing each other. “You told me your aunt and uncle tried to work the magic out of you with mundane chores.”

“All kids had chores, and they kind of sucked at dealing with kids anyways.”

“But aren’t you glad you’ve come here, escaped from all that?”

“Of course.”

“Then you understand—”

“No,” said Harry firmly. “I don’t.”

Glancing up at the portrait-lined walls (and startling several of their subjects into pretending they hadn’t just been eavesdropping), Severus turned and led the way back into the empty hall behind them, walking slowly towards the alternative staircase that they could get down on. “You’re an… empathetic sort of person,” the Slytherin said. “So imagine all the kids out there who are stuck with people like your aunt and uncle. Like my dad.”

“Do you mean muggles, or adults who shouldn’t be raising kids?”

“Both. They’re inseparable.”

“That’s just ridiculous. Plenty of muggleborns and half-bloods have perfectly acceptable parents.”

“Yeah? Name them, we’ll see.”

“Hector. His mum’s a muggle, and a doctor, and a lovely person.”

Severus snorted. “Smithe’s family life has hardly been idyllic. Try again.”

Harry frowned, not sure what Severus was referring to, or what he would know about Hector’s home life, but there was a gleaming alternative. “Lily Evans.”

Severus bristled a bit, as he always did when Lily was mentioned. “And what do you know about Evans’s family?”

“I know her dad was happy to send me a physics textbook last year.”

“A physics—why did you need a physics textbook?”

“It doesn’t matter. The point is her family is supportive and proud.”
“But they know nothing,” Severus said harshly. “Evans wouldn’t have known she was a witch until she turned eleven if she weren’t so good with magic. If her parents had found out before Professor McGonagall showed up, she would have been taken to a muggle doctor, probably stuck in a hospital until they could figure out what was ‘wrong’ with her.”

“How could you know that? From what I’ve heard, her parents are—”

“Her parents, yes. Her sister—do you know about her? She’s absolutely wretched, would have gone to the police in a heartbeat if their dad weren’t the Deputy Chief.”

“Her dad’s a police officer?” Harry asked, caught off guard by the information. Aunt Petunia had never mentioned that, or anything about her parents, really.

“Yeah, he’s… what of it?”

“Nothing, just—how do you know that, anyways?”

Severus shot Harry an inscrutable look. “He’s the Deputy Chief in Cokeworth. Where I’m from.”

Harry’s footsteps slowed. “Wait,” he said. “You… you knew Evans before Hogwarts, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Severus said thickly, turning back to face Harry. He was studying him with that same expression, as if trying to judge whether or not this information held any value he could charge against Harry. Apparently not, because he went on, offering even more: “I was the one who told her she was a witch, and helped her hide it.”

Harry gaped—he couldn’t help it. Learning that Snape of all people had been something like friends with his mum and had never mentioned it in all the five years Harry had been his student had been strange enough, but this? The first person she had ever known to also have magic? Why had Professor Snape never mentioned it?

Then again, that conversation would have gone over swimmingly. Potter… our new celebrity… as arrogant as his father… by the way, I knew your mum when we were kids, interesting, right?

“Stop gaping, Harrigan; you look like an idiot,” Severus prompted, and Harry quickly shut his mouth. “What’s got you so interested, anyways?”

“Why would you tell me something like that?”

Severus arched an eyebrow. “I was under the impression that you already knew. You’ve talked to Evans several times, including, apparently, borrowing a book from her father. You already knew that I am from Cokeworth, since we exchanged letters, and that Evans and I are… were previously friends. All she would have to do is mention Cokeworth…” Severus paused, eyeing Harry speculatively. “Well, perhaps not. You are rather unobservant.”

Harry continued to stare back, not bothering to correct Severus as to what his question had meant. That logic was understandable, from what he was coming to understand about Slytherins, or at least Death Eater-y Slytherins, who seemed to believe that information, secrets, and blackmail were the true economy sustaining the wizarding world, but in that same vein it seemed ridiculous that one would every freely give away information about themselves. Least of all Severus, who would find a way to make his middle name the secret worth all the gold in Gringotts, if he even had a middle name, which was in and of itself something Harry expected he would never be able to pay the price to find out without subterfuge beyond what he was capable of.

“Okay, what the hell,” he said when Severus reached out to prod his arm, stepping neatly out of the
way. “Have you been taking any illicit potions? Are you under the imperius?”

“Are you? Is it really so surprising that I would draw a connection for you?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “And you decided to help with the letter. I didn’t even ask.” He squinted and the bemused Slytherin. It was unlikely that Severus was actually under the imperius, since they had been together most of the afternoon and Harry hadn’t noticed it before, but he was acting extremely suspicious. “When was the first time we spoke?”

“What?”

“The first time you and I talked. When was it?”

Severus’s other brow went up to join the first, but he did give the question a moment’s thought. “Last Christmas. Or Boxing Day, rather, since we did not directly speak when Slughorn decided I needed an assistant to split the pay with. Or perhaps in class before that. I don’t recall. Why?”

Harry frowned further. That answer was probably as accurate as he could have provided, and there’d only been a handful of people at the Christmas meals, so it probably was Severus, not an imposter. “Why are you being… nice?”

“Nice?” Severus echoed, and he looked abruptly as uncomfortable as Harry felt. “No, truly, Harrigan—have you hit your head? I am not ‘nice’.”

“No, you’re not.”

They stared at each other for several seconds longer before Severus spoke again. “If you are really so amazed that I would go out of my way to right mistakes I have made, you’re not only unobservant, but quite possibly the least observant student Hogwarts has ever seen. I do not leave debts unpaid.”

Well, Harry had to allow that. After all, they had only begun their strange association after Harry had stepped into the fight with the Marauders. Severus had only offered to tutor him for the potions OWL to pay the debt he felt he owed to Harry before Harry could find a way to cash in on it. And even now that they were used to spending a good amount of time with each other, and now that Severus knew that Harry had a much different attitude towards debts owed than he did, Harry also knew that Severus was constantly seeking to maintain equality, and not just for the sake of self-preservation, as Harry had once thought. No, there was also a good deal of pride motivating him. Severus might have been a manipulator who saw no problems with bending the truth to his own advantage, but he also had a sort of harsh honesty about him. At least in his interactions with Harry, who he probably saw no need to suck up to.

But it wasn’t the sort of honesty that meant he would willingly share personal information. Not unless he had something to gain.

Harry pushed the thought back in his mind and began walking again. “You were explaining how you could support someone like him.”

Severus took the change of pace in stride, and perhaps a shred of relief, to be back to a familiar argument. “I don’t understand why you don’t.”

“I’ve told you before. I am entirely neutral.”

“But you’re not, you’re really not. You claim to oppose the ideals he fights for.”

“Do I? I don’t even know what those ideals are, and I am still not interested.”
Severus sighed. “By which you mean you won’t listen to them. You are willfully ignorant.”

“I have other things to worry about, and I don’t support violence.”

“And this is why you’re in Ravenclaw: you’d rather get lost in books than face the real world.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, and also—Hector? Pandora? They’re both definitely opposed to all that’s been going on, and they’re Ravenclaws too.”

“It is a bad thing. If you had a motive in remaining neutral—well. Some go for war profiteering. Most are simply too scared. You?” Severus treated him with a look of disgust. “You’re just lazy. It will catch up with you someday.”

“I’m not lazy!” Harry protested hotly.

“Then are you afraid? Are you really that much of a coward that you won’t even form opinions, for fear of going against anyone else?”

Harry stiffened. He was, after all, always going to be a Gryffindor first, no matter how the seventies were changing him, and Gryffindors didn’t take kindly to being called cowards. “Funny, that coming from a Slytherin,” he snapped. “Being afraid and being a coward are not the same thing. You know nothing about me, Severus Snape. Nothing about me at all.”

“That makes the both of us, then,” Severus replied. He at least had the decency to look affronted. Good! He was as much to blame for this as Harry was.

But then he took a long, steadying breath, and seemed to compose himself. “Are you coming to the potions laboratory tomorrow? Regulus wants to review his salve-thickening techniques. He asked me to invite you.”

“So you can team up with him to try and get me to join the dark side? No—”

“Not everything is about you, you know,” Severus snapped. “Look. I’m sorry. I got you into this mess. Is that what you want to hear? If you want to be angry and push blame, fine. But Regulus lent us his owl, no questions asked or fee owed, and Regulus for whatever reason likes having you around when I’m tutoring him. The least you could do is humor his invitation.”

Harry stared for a long moment, and nodded. Debts owed. Severus hated those, apparently enough that he would even apologize if it helped clear them. “I could use the space to work on my warding project,” he admitted. But then he hesitated again. “He… Regulus, he… he isn’t one of…”

“One of what?”

“One of the ones… watching me. Is he?”

Severus frowned. They had reached a stairway that led down to the foyer of the Great Hall, where they could hear the clatter of cutlery on dishes and the usual buzz of conversation, and they both paused again, looking down it, rather than at each other.

“I don’t know,” Severus admitted at last. “I really don’t. I know who supports the Dark Lord, in my House, but trying to get a finger on who actually works for him is difficult. Regulus isn’t… he’s not officially part of things, yet, but everyone knows he will be, and sooner rather than later. He is better than I am at knowing things, which… the letters you’ve received make it sound like that’s his plan. To train a network of informants out of the students here. And Reg… he’s always been good at that. Information.”
"A network of spies, you mean?" Harry asked, with some confusion. "What sort of information could he possibly hope to find here? Sure, there's Dumbledore, but this is a school, not the ministry."

"No, it's not," Severus agreed. "But I didn't say spies. I said informants. Think about it—half the magical children in the country come through Hogwarts, and a disproportionate amount of us go into the ministry from here. If the Dark Lord can infiltrate every level of the ministry with his people..."

"He'll have information on everyone who works there," Harry said, voice not quite betraying the extent of his dawning horror. "He could blackmail the whole government."

"Exactly," Severus agreed. "Of course, that's only my theory. Maybe it's just something he's trying with you, to make you feel unsettled, that you're being watched. But I doubt it. Like I said—not everything has to do with you. You're nothing more than a tool to him, to train the ones he has here with."

At the bottom of the stairs, four familiar Gryffindor boys walked past, and Harry's eyes quickly found Pettigrew, trailing along and laughing shrilly at something James had said. "And if he can infiltrate every house in the country," he whispered hoarsely, remembering something Sirius had once said, in the nineties. "You don't know who his supporters are, you don't know who's working for him and who isn't; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves... "If you couldn't know who to trust..."

"If you stand behind him, you'll always know who to trust," Severus said, his voice matching Harry's for softness, though it was probably James and Sirius he was looking at, not Pettigrew, as their robes trailed behind them out of view. Then he took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. "I'm sorry. I cannot understand your insistence that you are neutral, and probably never will. Regulus and I—our places have been chosen for a long time now." He met Harry's eyes again. "I will still see you tomorrow?"

"Yes," said Harry, more resolutely this time. "I... yes. There's no proof. I won't hold my paranoia against him, especially if... if what's-his-face wants that."

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Mr. Harrigan,

Well meant and considerate as your request to lessen the workload of my people no doubt was, I am afraid that I have considered it and rejected it. After all, as you have previously observed, you are not the only young adult who stands to benefit from my guidance. You must understand, then, that we will continue to encourage the development of their talents in information gathering, a valuable skill.

You have, of course, raised the bar for their pursuits. So kindly providing your biographical tale not only gives me a template to judge their (and your) information with, but also encourages me to set them seeking more challenging fare. If you begin to suspect the identities of any of your watchers, do let me know. It won't do to have anyone grow complacent or obvious.

As for your minder, young Mr. Snape? I do value his efforts in guiding you through the basic aspects of communicating in the English language. However, I am writing to you, Mr. Harrigan, not him, and he had best mind that his efforts on your literacy dwell on the safe side of overbearing and
erasing your unique competencies. I have no doubt that Mr. Snape will come to his place among my people of his own merit, and should hate to see his designs on you upset that path.

Regardless, you have clearly improved yourself through his guidance, or at least your writing has. I gather as well that dear Regulus Black can, has, and will have a similar effect on your person. It is curious, isn’t it: For one who so staunchly insists he has no interests in my political workings, you have none-the-less admirably surrounded yourself with those whose company I might have advised.

However, theirs is not the only company you keep, Mr. Harrigan, and for that you hold value as a unique perspective; though loyal and true as our mutual acquaintances among your peers are, their outlook on those not included in our circles are limited and short-sighted. As mentioned in the matter of Mr. Snape, they more readily see the value of preexisting assimilation to the values of our cause than the potential a less refined witch or wizard might be hiding. You will find that beliefs can be taught, Mr. Harrigan, when they reflect an absolute truth. All the teacher requires is a choice selection of students.

Let us start, then, with your study group. As it was only founded last year, you have belonged to said group since near its conception, which is rather unusual considering your history. It seems the group holds as strong a bond as any might, despite its infancy, as your birthday celebration on Hallow’s Eve would display. There are others, of course, who will likewise be assessing your dear Hector Smithe and Pandora Moone, as they are so close to you, but do not leave out your own evaluations on account of our being delivered a disproportionate amount of information about them already. We shall, in the future, look into analysis of those outside of your limited circle of acquaintances, but it is likely you will need time and direction for those, which a letter is not the appropriate place to provide.

Please do write back with both the necessary care for your task and the appropriate haste. Dear Regulus’s owl is a magnificent creature, one of the few at Hogwarts who may reach me directly, but the Blacks would not be so foolish to mourn the loss of a bird.

V

On the final day of class before break, having completed their exams, the OWL-level Ancient Runes students were dismissed early, Professor Notaro wishing them a happy holidays. Only Harry remained in the room, and she ushered him forward.

“Have you finished it, then?”

“Yes,” said Harry. He took a box out of his bag, and from the box removed a long chord of beads made out of red clay, each carefully carved with runes. Every fifth bead was larger, a flat disk with runes lining the edges. It was a complete notice-me-not ward, not so powerful that the wearer couldn’t call attention to himself, or to distract from detection spells, but strong enough for them to sink into the background of any scene. Or so Harry hoped, as he passed it to the runes Professor. If he’d made any mistakes, he would have to start nearly over.

“Clay?” was Professor Notaro’s first comment after a long silence, looking up to regard Harry with her eyebrows raised.
“Pandora—er, that’s Pandora Moone, I mean, she’s in Ravenclaw—she suggested it,” Harry explained. He swallowed down the butterflies climbing up from his stomach. Never before had a class project inspired such nerves in him, but then again Harry couldn’t recall a project he’d worked so hard on, so maybe the alternating bursts of pride over his work and worry over its imperfections were normal. He’d have to ask Hermione… some day.

“And what was her reasoning?”

“Well… it’s easy to work with and carve the runes in. And you don’t need any spells or anything to, um, set the runes. Once you bake it, they’re solid.”

“True.” Notaro returned to her inspection. “We do often use clay for mock-ups of more complex spell proposals, but…”

“Is there something wrong with it?” Harry’s nerves were getting worse, and he rubbed the back of his neck. He hadn’t thought that the material he used would matter, so long as the form was right… was he wrong?

“No. No, not at all,” the Professor reassured him. “It’s just… not the material I would have expected for you. Are you ready to try and activate it?”

“Now?” Harry asked, surprise halting his fidgeting.

“I don’t see why not. Your array is sound, and I don’t see any faults or breaks that would make it dangerous to at least attempt.”

“Alright…”

“What incantation are you planning to use?”

“Er… Illuminus cantio.” It was a common activation spell. Severus had suggested a handful of others, but this was his first attempt and he didn’t want to mess anything up with unnecessary risks. After all, Severus’s experiments rarely took safety as a concern, despite the way he would come to stress it as a professor.

Notaro nodded. “Perhaps illuminus cantamen? It might agree more with the language you’ve used in this array. Matching your style, you know.”

Harry resisted the urge to shrug as he pulled out his wand, nodding instead. He really didn’t want the Professor to know that his Latin skills were on the cringeworthy side, even in the wizarding world where the language was twisted about horribly, since that would probably reflect poorly on her understanding of him as a wizard. The beads were already looking rather ominous, arranged on the wood of her desk that was already blackened with scorch marks and ink stains. For his project to be sitting on the evidence of all those past failures…

But Professor Notaro would have said something if she expected any fires. With one last gulp, Harry raised his wand and passed it in a circle over the beads three times over, intoning levelly—“Illuminus cantamen.”

It was strange: although Harry could not sense his own magic, he could feel the moment it began to sever from him and become its own, and he would have dropped the spell in his shock had it been any other school of magic. This was part of what made high-level runic circles so dangerous: once the casting began, it was nearly impossible to stop until the terms of the spell were complete. Harry could only observe with something between revulsion and fascination as his magic separated and became the ward’s.
It was so captivating, he almost did not notice when the spell ended, but Professor Notaro reached over to pluck the string of beads off her desk. “Very nice,” she said, grinning up at her student. Her smile faltered a bit when Harry stumbled to grab hold of the desk for stability, suddenly feeling like a band of lead had been strapped around his head, but then she laughed. “You know, I’d almost forgotten this was your first time activating this level of work. Has a real kick, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said warily. He wasn’t sure if ‘kick’ would be the word he would have chosen to describe it, not with how nauseous he was suddenly feeling. But if he looked as peaky as he felt, Professor Notaro didn’t seem to find it strange, so he tried to push away the feeling. “Did it work, then?”

“Only one way to find out!”

Cheerfully she held the beads out across the desk. There was definitely more than one way, Harry knew, and he regarded the string with suspicion. The magic on it felt strange, almost… dissonant, he would call it, if only he could place why he was bothered by it. But he had trusted the Professor this far, and she had never done anything even remotely harmful to him, other than push him far harder than any of the students he’d been in class with, and he couldn’t exactly be annoyed by that when he needed to learn faster. Besides, she knew more about wards than he could possibly hope to. Warily, he reached out to take it from her, only for the Professor to move to wrap it around his wrist for him. The moment his hand passed through the opening, the feeling of unease vanished. The ward began spreading over his body even as she continued to twist the string so it could wrap around his arm like a bracelet. Harry’s eyes fluttered shut. He followed the path of the magic as it slid over his skin, sealing together at the end of each limb and at the top of his head with a satisfying sense of completeness.

He opened his eyes again as Notaro withdrew her hand, just in time to catch her pulling out her wand and drawing on the magic needed to cast a silent spell. Reflexively, Harry yelped, but the spell did little more than light up the ward, so he was momentarily illuminated by a soft, golden glow. It was not unlike the visualization spell that Severus had found. If anything, it was less confusing to Harry than that one had been, since the magic in the ward really was weaving together to form a web-like structure over his skin, and a visual representation of that was not so unsuited as a visual representation of all the magic in a room.

Notaro made an approving sound and cut her spell off, though Harry barely noticed the dissipation of the magic with the ward sitting so comfortably over his skin. “Looks like a ward, feels like a ward, but will it act like one?” the professor challenged. “Well, run along then. See how it behaves in action.”

“You’re… you’re saying I should go around wearing this? I thought you were going to send it in for my OWL, Professor…?”

“Oh, I will, I will, Mr. Harrigan. But you’ll need to do a full write-up, and wearing that about will no doubt give you some, ah, unique insights into what you have created. Consider it informal data collection. Now, you’d best be off before you’re late to your next exam. Have the write up to me by —you are staying on for the holiday, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Monday next, then, at lunch. Before Horace lays claim to all your time with his brewing projects. Run along!”

Harry opened his mouth, but when the first bell began to ring, he forgot what he was intending to
ask. Instead, he just said, “Thank you, Professor.”

“No, thank you, Mr. Harrigan. We’ll make a proper NEWT student of you yet.”

Walking out into the hall was one of the strangest experiences of Harry’s already peculiar life. It was almost as though he had sunk back into the shell he’d spent his early years with the Dursleys in—the too short, too skinny, too messy boy in the too-big clothes that no one could ever spare a glance for. Of course, he had always appreciated the level of anonymity that came naturally in the seventies; there had been some strange looks when he had first ‘transferred’ in, and recently several pureblood and Slytherin seventh-years had begun to eye at him like they were unsure if he was a deep sea horror or brightly colored tropical fish, but neither of those came close to the day-to-day gawking that had made him so uncomfortable in the nineties, the product of being *Harry Potter*. However, even compared to the relative non-identity he had become in the seventies, stepping into the hall with the ward on was a whole new level of non-existence that made him feel all at once very, very alone.

He likened it, at first, to stepping into a pensieve memory. There he was, walking down the hall amidst all the other students, and yet no one noticed him. In a memory, however, the other students would have passed through him like a ghost, his physical presence entirely separate from their world. With the ward, it was as though he was a piece of the background: their eyes slid over the space he filled, seeing but not comprehending or identifying, and they would brush by without even noticing they were turning their shoulders to accommodate him. Even Regulus, walking with a group of fifth-years, who was normally so aware of his surroundings that he could find all of his acquaintances in a busy moving crowd and would smile to greet them as though they were alone, did not seem to recognize Harry when their bodies were inches apart, then brushing shoulders as they passed in separate directions.

By the end of the hall, Harry’s fascination with the strangeness was overridden by a sudden swell of terror, and he had to push himself up against the wall, grasping at Hogwarts’s rough stone and forcing in and out several long breaths. He wasn’t sure why it was so alarming, to not be noticed. He’d worn the invisibility cloak hundreds of times, and had never panicked like this. If anything, this was what he was supposed to be living like—as little a part of anyone’s lives as possible, so his disappearance when he found his way back would make no difference. Reality suddenly stood in stark relief: what was the use of trying if even by just walking down a hall he affected so many lives in little ways that would be sure to build up? He was supposed to be living like this, barely existing, and if only he had succeeded he wouldn’t have been in half the troublesome situations he currently was struggling with.

Despite that realization, it was still a struggle to get his rapid heart rate under control, even as he timed his breaths and drew upon his occlumency to push the discomfort out. And when the familiar voices drifted towards him around the corner, he latched on quickly, hoping to make use of the ward in order to distract himself from it, and easily fell into step behind Lily and Remus.

“I’m just saying,” Lily was explaining to her fellow prefect, not unkindly. “If he was serious about his change, he’d hold Black accountable for his words.”

“I, I’m amazed you’ve had such a change of heart. Thinking James could ever control Sirius? You must believe he’s Merlin reincarnated.”

“Ha bloody ha. You know what I mean. If Black has a hair of respect for anyone, it’s Potter.”

“He has respect for plenty, it’s just…”

“What, no defense after all?”

Remus sighed and pulled Lily off into a window niche. Harry very nearly collided with them, but
managed to keep walking normally to the next niche, a column blocking Remus and Lily from seeing him and a gap between that and the wall letting their hushed voices through, even over the din. Neither of the Gryffindors seemed to notice.

“That Sirius… didn’t go home last summer? Yeah, that’s not exactly true.”

“What? But everyone knows he spent it with the Potters. Neither of them would shut up about it at the start of term…”

“He did, but he went to his parents place first. Thought he owed it to his brother to try and be there, or something.”

“And? How does this…?”

“They gave him an ultimatum and… I really shouldn’t be telling you this…”

“Jesus, Remus. I’m not going to go around shouting it for the world to hear.”

“I know, but…” Remus dropped his voice, and Harry had to crane his neck into the gap behind the column to try and hear. It would have earned him strange looks, if it weren’t for the ward. “…him that he could either become a Death Eater and swear his loyalty to the Dark Lord on his own, or they would find a way to make him. Seeing as there was no other use for him to the family, and he was a disgrace to their name barely worth redeeming himself, and all that.”

“…Merlin. I may loathe Black, but I at least know he would never join a group like that on his own… the ‘Death Eaters’. I’ve been hearing more and more unpleasant things about them. Did you say they’ve got a Dark Lord with them?”

“That’s what the Blacks all say, but there’s been nothing in the papers…”

“And Black left after that?”

“Sort of. He was locked in his room for a week, only one of their house elves for brief company, to bring him food. The moment he was let out he made a break for it, shouting some dramatic declarations of how he would fight these Death Eaters to—well, to the death. At least, that’s how he tells it.”

“You don’t believe it? He’s your friend…”

“James let slip that they had to take Sirius to St. Mungo’s when he first showed up, and it didn’t sound much like a check-up. I can guess.”

“…Okay. Well, that’s horrible, and I truly… but it doesn’t excuse him being a total asshole all the time. I mean, Merlin, that’s shit, absolute shit, but… He’s always been an impossible bully, Rem.”

“But you can’t blame James for the way Sirius acts. It’s not fair. Not to James; not to Sirius. They support each other through everything, thank God, but…”

The hallway was beginning to clear out. “Come on,” said Lily after a long lull. “We’ll be late to charms if we don’t get down there.”

“Just think about it?”

“Maybe…”

Harry waited until they were several feet away before peeling off the wall and following at a slower
pace. He knew he should feel bad for eavesdropping, but he couldn’t bring himself to, not when listening in to conversations was the closest thing to a connection with his parents’ and godparent’s relationship as he was going to get.

And unlike Lily, Harry did think that what Sirius was going through somewhat explained his behavior. His godfather had told Harry before how his family was steeped in the Dark Arts, how he wanted nothing to do with them and yet his family tried to shove them down his throat, how it became so intolerable he had run away. His hatred of all things Dark made sense, when Harry thought about it that way. Severus had no qualms expressing his nearly… loving fascination with that same branch of magic that Sirius despised, and Sirius had probably first lashed out at him as a proxy. It wasn’t right, but Severus had just been a kid, and Sirius had finally had a chance at expressing the anger he had no hope of bringing against his parents. No, it wasn’t right… but it made sense. As much sense as anything he’d watched his godfather do since he’d arrived here, at least, and —well, it was almost comforting, having some level of understanding. Not that it was right, just…

Harry paused just outside of the charms room, drawing no attention from even the other members of his study group as they went through the door. When had he become so… pragmatic? It made him feel old, and he was only seventeen, for Merlin’s sake. But the Harry that had yelled at Sirius and Lupin through the floo in March of ’96 seemed like an entirely different person from that he was now. It had only been one year, one very convoluted year, but for a brief moment Harry wondered if he had spent it being worried about the wrong sort of change. Maybe the future would play out exactly as Harry remembered it, but when he returned, it would be he who had been irreversibly changed. And what would happen when Harry Potter returned more like Harrigan, the Ravenclaw who kept company with Slytherins, who attended a Death Eater meeting at Malfoy Manor, who was now trapped maintaining a correspondence with a Dark Lord—with the enemy of everyone who he’d ever cared for? Would Ron and Hermione even like him anymore? Would he be able to meet their eyes?

Before he could spiral any further down that gnome hole, the second bell rang, and Harry hurried through the door. Flitwick’s class was, as always, held in a classroom with stacked rows of desks on the left and right while the Professor himself perched on a pile of books at the front, arranging them like the choir in St Paul’s or Westminster Abbey. Luckily for Harry, there was a seat open near the close end of the top left row, between Severus and Olivia Higgs, another Slytherin, which he hurried to as Flitwick began to take role. Severus did not so much as blink when Harry climbed over the bench… and a smile crept across Harry’s face. Professor Notaro was right, it would be best to test the constraints of the ward first-hand.

So when Flitwick called out “Harrigan,” he stuck his hand straight in the air, keeping his eyes on Severus, and proclaimed in a much louder voice than he would normally use, “Present, sir.”

Severus jumped about a foot. It earned him sniggers from the Marauders, clustered together in the opposite corner of the room, but Harry thought Severus’s attempts to hide his bafflement behind a glare was worth it. After all, when he did get back to the nineties, Harry was going to need that sort of memory to face Professor Snape.

A press of cold from where the beads sat against his wrist drew Harry’s attention away from Severus’s consternation. The ward was struggling, since he had intentionally drawn attention to himself. A handful of his classmates were now staring at him in confusion—all from the study group, he noted, and Hector most of all, his wide eyes and poorly concealed grin telling Harry he had realized the word was activated and working. Even Flitwick was giving Harry an odd look, though he continued down the role list without pause. As his classmates attentions were one by one drawn away, the beads returned to room temperature.
Severus tore off a scrap of parchment and passed him a note—concisely kept to just a question mark. Harry grinned, picking up the anti-cheating charmed quill Flitwick provided his students with for exams, and wrote back:

—Ward test worked. Notice-me-not

Severus eyed it for a moment, and replied in his barely legible, cramped and spiky cursive, — Better take it off before F notices.

—? Prof Notaro told me to test it

—Not at an exam, idiot. You’ll get accused of cheating.

Harry frowned slightly, but he could see what Severus meant. He hid his hands under the desk and unwound the string of beads from his wrist, slowly drawing them off, but couldn’t help his flinch when the magic of the ward snapped all at once away from him to fill only the space contained by the beads. He tried to put it away in his bag, but the moment he let go he felt the separation keenly, and elected instead to put it in the pocket of his robes, close enough he could feel it’s magic as though he was in direct contact again.

— Better?

— Infinitely.

Then Flitwick jumped down off his pile of books, nearly toppling over in the process, and with a swish of his wand had the stack of exam papers swirling through the air, distributing each blank sheet one at a time in front of each of the students. Harry quickly swept the note away, Severus put down his books, and when Flitwick cleared his throat several times the Gryffindors finally stopped talking and settled down.

"Fifty minutes, on my mark," Flitwick said, his eyes scanning over each of them. "Miss Sanchez, books away, thank you. No talking until the test is complete... Everyone have their quills?" As one, the sixth years held up their quills, used to the question that had become ritual before each of the charms tests. "All ready then... three, two, one..."

With a final flourish, the blank pages flowed with ink. Harry had always wondered if Flitwick’s exam charm was where the Marauders had gotten the spell for their map, but for now he dove into his test, tuning out all the distractions from his thoughts. There were some day-to-day practical applications to studying occlumency, after all.

When they emerged from the classroom fifty minutes later, Harry was shaking his ink-stained hand fiercely, but the lightness of being done with the quarter put a spring in his step. Still—"Did he have to choose that for an essay question?" he grumbled to Severus. "Honestly? It was so open ended we could have regurgitated half the book and still not answered it all."

"It was open-ended so you could choose something to focus on," Severus replied. "Come to the library with me?"

"Is it a date? How romantic, Severus."

"Fuck off. Tell me about the ward."

Harry hummed, brightening further at the mention of his earlier success, and shoved his hand into his pocket, twisting his hand about to try and wrap the beads around his wrist, and was pleased by the feeling of magic resettling over his skin. "Well, it works."
"Yes, I can see that, you imbecile. Are you—do you have to put that back on? It’s bloody irritating, trying to talk to you with it on."

"Professor Notaro told me to test it out. You know, practical data collection. Or something."

"Or something. Will the beads work for the Null Ward? You've almost finished diagramming it, haven't you?"

"It seems to work well enough for this." Harry pulled his hand back out and inspected the beads. On the surface level, it seemed like a strange fashion choice, not noticeable as a magical item. "It's a little clunky, though."

"Have you considered enlarging smaller beads, carving them, and shrinking them back down before you activate the ward?"

"Would that work? Wouldn't it distort the runes?"

"Not if you do it accurately enough," Severus said dryly. "If you made them large enough to work with, you'd be able soften the edges of what you've carved, as well, so they wouldn't scratch you like that."

"Scratch...?" Harry frowned, but realized Severus was right; several spots where the edges of the runes were sharp were leaving tiny red marks on his wrist.

"Huh. Well, it's worth a try. Maybe on a single-rune structure, first, though... So I don't have to redo the entire ward. You will go over my schematic before I activate it?"

"Yes, yes, I said I would. You could just show it to Notaro."

"And then have her asking me why I'm so invested in this? No thank you. Do you have the book to turn back in?"

"Already? Can't you keep it out over winter break? Pince usually allows..."

"Except then I have to keep the hospital book out as well, or it'd look suspicious."

"And?"

Harry shrugged. They had reached the library, so it really wasn't the time to be talking about his lending away a book he'd taken out from the restricted section. Pince would be on them in a heartbeat. "And nothing, I guess."

They sat down together in their usual table, Harry automatically reaching for his transfiguration textbook. That was the last exam he had left, and he was feeling rather behind. After that, they'd be free for the holidays. Well, he would—Severus also had Arithmancy, since the NEWT students met in the late class block.

"Wait on that for a moment," Severus said. "We need to talk."

"About the ward? I mean, you've been—"

"No, about everything else. We need a plan for this break, and I imagine you'll be in the post-exam party in Ravenclaw tower this evening."

Harry, ignoring the first part of the sentence, smiled. The Ravenclaws, for all their usual trend of intense studying and tendency for introversion, nonetheless did have their term parties. It was only
natural, he supposed, that they were celebrating the freedom from exams, since at least in comparison to his time in Gryffindor they took the exams far more seriously than the other students. It was the reason why he was in a NEWT study group in sixth year, after all. "Yes, Hector wants me on his trivia team, for whatever reason."

"...you play trivia games at your parties?"

"Drunk trivia, for the upperclassmen. What do you expect? It's Ravenclaw."

"And you lot succeed in proving every stereotype," Severus said with a sigh. "And where exactly do you get the alcohol?"

"Don't play dumb. Everyone knows Slytherin upper years have their rotation of smuggling in bottles after Hogsmeade. Ravenclaw, on the other hand, keeps its secrets."

He said that, but he really didn't know. He'd only been to the after-OWLs party the year before, so this would be his second, and he didn't care to know the details, nor did he know the seventh years in his house well enough to even guess which ones were their Weasley twins for bringing in contraband. He did know there was butterbeer for the younger kids, which was easy enough to get ahold of (one had only to ask the house elves nicely, after all), and that was all he intended to drink.

"Right," Severus scoffed. But then he paused, and retrieved his wand from his robes to cast a standard barrier ward layered with *muffliato* over them. Harry raised an eyebrow, ignoring how much he disliked the feeling of that particular spell, and Severus, despite having just cast a spell ensuring they would not be overheard, leaned in. "Have you written your response to the Dark Lord yet?"

"Ugh." That put a damper on his good mood. "You had to remind me."

"He wrote you on Wednesday, Harry."

"And he said to take my time with it, and that at least is an instruction I can follow. Besides—when exactly would I have written it? Between you and Hector forcing me to study for exams and getting two warding projects, where would I find time to compose a letter to a madman that is—"

"Harrigan!" Severus hissed.

"*You* put up the ward. Ten seconds ago, you put up the ward. Calm—"

"That doesn’t mean you should suddenly lose grasp of what minimal intelligence you have!"

"—down." Harry rolled his eyes. "I’ll write it tonight."

"What, while drunk? I know your head is particularly vacuous, but—"

"Actually, that would probably be better," Harry said thoughtfully. Writing Voldemort while drunk was just stupid enough to sound like it might be a decent plan, since he would theoretically have less care for the fact that the man had told him to sell out his friends. But even Harry had more sense than that, Severus’s insults be damned. "But no, I won’t be getting drunk or writing drunk, or any of that. My spelling is bad enough without that."

"It really is," Severus agreed, though he contained adding any of his own comments. "Well, write a draft up tonight, and we’ll resolve it after breakfast tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir, General Severus, sir," Harry deadpanned. "And I thought you said he was telling you to
stay out of my response?"

“You’re not going to send a letter to the Dark Lord that isn’t short of fully comprehensible English. And with your gift of writing, our efforts on the previous letter will be wasted if I leave you to yourself for a single paragraph.”

“Is Severus Snape disobeying orders from his holiness? I may faint.”

“What has gotten into you? I am not disobeying anything, though fuck you very much for being an ass. I am trying to help you, Harrigan, if you will remember that. The Dark Lord’s instructions were to avoid being overbearing in my editing, and he did advise you to learn what you could from me.”

“Right,” said Harry, biting his cheek to avoid pointing out that it was probably impossible for Severus to be anything less than overbearing. They didn’t need to start arguing again. When he felt more in control, he added: “Thank you for that. I will write it tonight.”

“And we ought to set up a plan considering your occlumency,” Severus went on. Harry tried not to groan. It was his brilliant idea to request Severus’s help on that front, and it was important…

“Can’t I just have one day to be proud of this,” he asked, brandishing the ward wrapped around his wrist, “and celebrate the end of term and not worry about the bloody Dark Lord?”

“And you need to finish the your other ward. You have quite the busy holiday ahead of you.”

“Professor Notaro says Slughorn is probably going to recruit us for brewing again,” Harry said, resignation setting in as he let his hand fall back to rest on his forgotten Transfiguration textbook. “And I have a write-up for this one due Monday.”

“How long will that take you?”

“A day, at least.”

“I’ll help you out; we’ll make it fit into the latter half of tomorrow. After we finish that letter.”

“No offense, but your handwriting is noticeably different from mine. And if you write like you talk it will sound like I fell asleep with my head on an insulting thesaurus.”

“I didn’t say I’d write it; I said I’d help. Which will be another favor you owe me, since I am not allowed to pay my debts, according to you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And on Sunday you will etch the beads for your ward—you will have it done by then?”

“Do I have a say in the matter?”

“You’ll have your elf bake them in the afternoon while we use the owlery to attempt legilimency on the birds.”

Harry frowned. Why did the antagonistic sort of wizards he had the misfortune of running into not care about the well-being of owls? Was there some conspiracy here? Is that why Severus would join the Death Eaters—a mutual disregard for the fact that these birds were beautiful, intelligent, emotive familiars, who deserved to be more than victims of wizard’s plots?

Before he could decide whether he wanted to voice his objection to that part of the plan—knowing full well he had agreed to it when they first spoke about occlumency—the magic of the ward shifted.
Harry looked up quickly, finding Regulus approaching. *Muffliato* always bothered him for how the magic of it behaved; it was like a wall of magical maggots was shielding them from the rest of the room. Now, as Regulus approached, he felt how it worked. Several of the ‘maggots’ peeled away from the wall and flew to burrow into Regulus’s ears. Though the younger Slytherin didn’t seem to notice, Harry frowned and quickly nudged his companion. Severus, however, cancelled out only the barrier charm with a subtle flick of his wand and a mumbled *finite*, allowing the *muffliato* to stay in place as Regulus stepped through.

“Severus,” the fifth-year said with all of his usual pleasantness contained in his smile. “I had hoped you would be here.”

“Regulus.”

“How was your potions exam?” Harry asked. After the tutoring session on Saturday, Harry had offered to help quiz Regulus for the written portion of his exam. Severus had found both their performances less-than-stellar and took over the quizzing, and by the time he got through Harry was confident he could have sat the exam and earned an ‘O’, despite not having touched the fifth-year material for a year. Though it had wasted a good portion of Harry’s day, by the end of it Harry noticed that he had managed to relax with the two Slytherins and forget that they were Voldemort’s spies, at least in the future.

Regulus glanced down at him, blinking several times. Then his mouth formed into an ‘o’ and his grey eyes brightened as he found Harry’s wrist sitting on the table. “You must have activated the ward! How very peculiar.”

“Oh, right,” said Harry sheepishly, shaking it off again. The ward had been on the outside of his sleeve now, so he hadn’t felt it grow cold when he drew Regulus’s attention. “Forgot about that, sorry. Um, how did it feel? If you don’t mind? Professor Notaro wants me to do a write-up.”

Regulus tilted his head. “Well, it was somewhat strange, now that I know you’re here. Logically, I could tell that there was someone sitting with Severus, but I was entirely unconcerned in identifying it as you. Except, I must have known, at some level, or I wouldn’t have come over at all, though I was only intending to find Severus, I am afraid. You’re a delightful bonus.”

“Huh,” said Harry, thinking about it. “That sounds about right. I wore it out in the hallways earlier—I actually walked right in front of you, but I suppose you didn’t notice?”

“I haven’t seen you since breakfast,” Regulus agreed. “You must have very thoroughly succeeded in your casting. Barty does tell me you’re the top of his class.”

“He’ll be moving up to be with my class come January,” Severus said.

“Really? Congratulations.”

“Possibly,” Harry corrected, cheeks heating up with embarrassment. “Professor Notaro is sending in this, once I finish the report. She thinks it will be enough to waive the OWL, but I’ve never heard of that ever happening.”

“NEWTs are more valuable than OWLs, in the long run. And I had wondered why you were taking on so large of a project at the end of term.”

“Because he’s a bloody mental overachiever, is why. That’s three years of classes he’s done in half the time. Three and a third, if you count that he’s missed the first third of this year for NEWT levels.”

Harry groaned, not looking forward to the amount of catch-up he’d be doing if Professor Notaro
actually moved him. She claimed he was ready, but there was six months left in the OWL year, and surely he’d be missing something there, which he’d be speeding to learn along with the NEWT materials…

And was that Severus being nice again, in his uniquely crass way? What was the world coming to?

“Yes, well, we can’t all be Ravenclaws, can we?” Regulus said brightly. “In any case, that’s not what I came over here to ask you about.”

“Oh please save us from the stoking the fires in the depths of Harrigan’s fathomless ego,” Severus pleaded mockingly. Harry kicked his shin beneath the table.

“You know as well as I that Harry’s ego is woefully underfed, Severus. Now, may I speak, or should you like to waste your breath with more undeserved insults?”

“Go on then,” said Severus, looking strangely satisfied. Oh, but he thrived on Harry’s embarrassment.

Regulus’s grey eyes narrowed. His head pulled up, his spine drawing becoming rigidly straight, and he looked down his nose at Severus, looking for the moment exactly as Harry might have imagined a pureblood Slytherin scion. “Well, I don’t know if I should bother at all, if you are going to be like that. No matter. I shall simply employ the patience cousin Narcissa has begged of me on your behalf, yet again.”

Harry felt his ears getting hot as he did his best to study the freckles on the backs of his hands. His suddenly cold tones were as close to losing his temper as Regulus ever seemed to come, and both times Harry had heard them (the previous being when confronting Sirius on Halloween) they had been raised in Harry’s defense. What he’d done to earn it besides making a fool of himself time and time again, Harry didn’t know, but it was somewhat… flattering, to see Regulus to loosen his normally impeccable control.

He was probably just proving Severus’s comments about his ego right, though. For all he knew, the pair of them had some ongoing disagreement he had no part in, and the last time… well, Harry didn’t really what was going on between the Black brothers.

But Severus did look somewhat guilty, and Harry was growing more confused. Narcissa was—Narcissa Malfoy? Or Black, he supposed, if she and Lucius weren’t married yet. He remembered her off the family tree; Tonk’s aunt and Bellatrix’s sister. What would she be doing, begging Regulus to be patient with Severus? Was it just one of those turns of phrase Harry would never quite understand, being outside of the bizarre bubble of upper class pureblood society?

“But don’t mind Harry and I, Regulus,” Severus said, sounding strangely apologetic. “We tease, but mean no harm. You understand ours is an, ah, symbiotic relationship. Both of us are better when the other thrives.”

“Then you ought not let something so ugly as jealousy come between you,” Regulus said, tone still clipped.

Harry stifled a laugh. Severus, jealous of him? That would be the day. “You had a question, Regulus?” he prompted, eager to move past this strange tension between them. “Is it between you and Sev, or should I stick around?”

Regulus considered him for a moment, then sighed, dropping onto the bench beside Severus, a normal teenager once again. “It does concern you both, after a fashion, though more yourself, to be
true,” he said. “You see, I am returning to London, for the holiday.”

“Oh,” said Harry, not really sure why that was such an announcement. Only a handful of students ever stayed on at the castle, himself and Severus included.

“It’s only of note in that normally I would take my owl with me,” Regulus went on.

“Ah,” said Severus. “I understand your point.”

“Um… I think you’ve lost me.”

Regulus glanced around, but Severus quickly cut in. “We’re warded. Muffliato.”

The boy raised an eyebrow, but nodded shortly. Like Severus, even recognizing the spell he leaned in, lowering his voice. “Do you know why Severus borrowed my owl the last time you sent a letter, Harry?”

“...You’re kinda the only person I know who has an owl,” Harry admitted. Pandora had a cat, but he couldn’t pick it out from the rest of them in the tower, and cats couldn’t carry mail, anyhow. Hector only took Care of Magical Creatures for Pandora’s sake, and was strangely nervous around all sorts of animals. Besides, even if one of them did have an owl, he wouldn’t dare send it to Voldemort.

“Well, Severus knows plenty, but he still asked me,” Regulus said pointedly.

“It’s because his owl is the only owl in the school that is allowed direct access to the Dark Lord,” Severus explained, apparently not in the mood for guessing games. “He has enchantments preventing most owls from finding him. Most people who want to contact him have to go through someone else.”

“But your owl can find him?” Harry said, occluding to keep his tone flat. He didn’t want to waste his time worrying over what that meant—he knew Regulus would become a Death Eater eventually, after all, but that had never stopped them talking civilly before.

“Atlas was my father’s owl for several years,” Regulus explained, voice soft again, casting a glance back over his shoulder before he continued. “My father… he is not one of the Dark Lord’s servants himself, being of poor health and not as driven to action as Lord Malfoy. But he has known the Dark Lord since he was a boy, and it is my parents hope that I will be the face of the Black family in the Dark Lord’s forces, as soon as he will have me. He gave me Atlas, so that I might be of some use to those of us here in the school.”

Harry understood what that meant, and did his best not to scowl. Regulus’s owl had to be the one Voldemort’s ‘watchers’ were using to send the results of their spying, if he really was the only one in the owlery that could get to him. After Voldemort’s latest request—for Harry to pass on information about his friends—the thought of mimicking their patterns in any way left a bad taste in his mouth. He wasn't going to become one of Voldemort's little spies.

And he also wasn't going to get Regulus's owl killed, if he could help it. "Take your owl home," he said. "There's other ways of getting mail through, right?"

Regulus tilted his head. "Yes. Usually you have to have another contact to forward it on..." His eyes flicked to Severus, who sighed.

"Lucius will be so thrilled," he said in a strangely dull voice. "And what is your brilliant reasoning this time, Harrigan?"
Harry ignored him. "Atlas is a beautiful bird," he told Regulus. "You must take good care of him."

"Yes, that would be safe to say. He rather inspired me to take Care of Magical Creatures, him and my elf."

Harry struggled to keep the shock from showing on his face. Kreature inspiring anyone—and Regulus had to mean Kreature, didn't he? "Well, he's safer with you than carrying letters from me."

"Harry," Severus said sharply. "I am editing whatever you send."

"Yes, of course. I'm not about to turn down your help. But... well, he's awfully volatile, after all, and I don't need any more quills in my collection, thank you very much."

Regulus looked confused, but he nodded slowly. "If you are choosing inconvenience to keep Atlas safe, then thank you. That... is what you are doing?"

"The last bird I used was his, and he killed it, just to make a point." Harry's lip curled in distaste. "If he would kill his own owl to make a point, he wouldn't hesitate to kill yours. Er. No offense."

"None taken," Regulus said with a false lightness. "If you truly don't mind achieving sainthood by virtue of patience, I agree that taking any help Severus can provide you is in your best interest. If he would kill an owl, he would kill you." Almost unwillingly, it seemed, his face shifted into the slightest of smiles. "No offense."

Harry let himself laugh, because that was the easier response, but the discussion had done away with the honest happiness he'd felt earlier. "Don't I know it," he said. "Thank you for going out of your way to let us know."

"Of course." Regulus glanced again towards Severus, then away with a roll of his eyes, though only Harry could see the subtle gesture. "Before Hallow's Eve, you said you hadn't made up your mind about any politics. Now, half the school is aware that you are in correspondence with the Dark Lord himself. Should we take it that you have made up your mind?"

"The day Harry makes up his mind about anything is the day up is down," Severus said crossly. They never had resolved their argument about his neutrality, and they probably never would.

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"Severus, kindly wait to speak again until I have left," Regulus said, his tone flat. "Harry?"

Harry regarded him. He liked Regulus, he knew that much. He had a sort of... grace about him, a sense of place in the world—one that Sirius certainly lacked, and which if he put his mind to it long enough he found that no one else he’d ever met quite matched. Pandora came close with her moments of elegance, but she was definitely Luna’s mother, and it was hard to take anyone seriously when they routinely made art projects of their breakfast. Regulus only broke his politeness to show his razor-sharp edges, like a house cat unsheathing it's claws, and that did not particularly detract from his image.

But liking Regulus wasn’t the same as trusting him. After all, he trusted Severus, but rarely liked him. The first time they’d met (which they were speaking of now) Regulus had gotten Harry to agree to going to a Death Eater meeting, and that was certainly something he’d never had any intention of ever doing until Regulus showed up. That sort of manipulation was dangerous, and it made Harry uncomfortable in the way Lucius Malfoy made him uncomfortable—Lucius Malfoy of the nineties,
not the present Lucius Malfoy: distributor of Fairy Wine and decrier of his father’s outrageous lack of aesthetics. Lucius who Severus had just mentioned sending the letters through. If Regulus was the one providing the owl for the rest of Voldemort’s ‘watchers’, it was highly likely that he was one himself, and anything Harry said would get back to less than friendly ears.

“My mind was made up before I went, and I haven’t changed my it about anything,” he chose to answer dryly. “And I don’t think I will anytime soon, no matter how many people try to devalue my choice of neutrality. I value my life, after all.”

Regulus smiled. “Of course you do. But you are exchanging letters with the Dark Lord, after all, and that’s not exactly a ‘neutral’ action.”

“No, but I can’t exactly be the one to stop it. I tried that. It killed Isis…” He glanced at Severus, who had crossed his arms and pursed his lips. “And Sev says it would kill me.”

If Regulus’s smile fell at all as he stood up, Harry couldn’t see it. “Yes,” he agreed. “It would. Have a good holiday.”

Sir,

I’m afraid that once again I’m going to disappoint you with my response not being precisely what you want to hear. However, Severus informs me that it is rude not to reply to a letter at all, and Regulus does value his owl. Unfortunately he has returned home for the holiday, so this indirect delivery will have to do. I think you already know what I’m going to say, so I will attempt to bore you thoroughly, as requested.

Hector is, yes, a close acquaintance, all the better for his fierce independence and dedication to stand up for what he believes in, even in the face of those who would try to squash his voice. His muggle mother taught him all manner of curious things like the value of respecting others and human decency, after all. Pandora had no mother to teach her that, but I’d say the elves did a decent enough job. They probably had a hand in teaching her that all sentient beings have an equal right to live their lives in peace, not being trampled on by self-important species exclusionists. A rather unpopular view, I’ve been told.

The rest of my revision group? Well, I’m sure you know already, but we have one of Hogwarts’ two out and proud homosexual couples, a pair of lovely Hufflepuffs. Finnegan Floyd is a muggleborn and Thomas Kirke has willingly left his traditionalist family when they tried to ‘cure’ him and force him into an arranged marriage with his cousin, since apparently blood status is more important than the dangers of inbreeding and the negligible matter of personal preference. Who knew? Well, they have the full support of every member of our little group.

Of course, then there’s the Gryffindors. We have Lily Evans, a muggleborn who hexed Macnair with a quite nasty and emasculating curse when he tried to lay a hand on her friend Mary MacDonald last year. And MacDonald, who convinced Evans to join her in petitioning the ministry for the removal of Dementors from Azkaban, because even criminals don’t deserve to suffer at the hands (or mouths?) of dark creatures, and their roommate Miriam Alexi, who plans on joining the Holyhead Harpies as soon as there’s an opening, whether she’s through NEWTs or not. From my own house, there’s Catarina Sanchez, who is revising both for her NEWTs and her A-Levels.
because she wants to study medicine at a muggle institution before applying for Mungo’s, and there’s Mandy Martins, who only attends because it is the easiest way to get her homework done and she finds detention boring.

And there are four others, who I don’t have any insights to share about. I suspect you know more about Lucinda Talkalot and Gwendolyn Noble than I ever will simply by their proximity to your groupies in Slytherin. (Severus has insisted several times that I should not use such a term, but I suspect he is just attempting to preserve his own dignity.) The other two Ravenclaws have, in the last year, failed to instill a single memory on me worth expending the ink to recall. I do not particularly care to waste my time studying people when I could be reading books instead. After all, my revision group does have exams to prepare for, and we do not sit around chit-chatting about abandoning common sense to waste our futures on a conflict we have no part in.

But I suppose your watchers have told you that.

D. Harrigan

~

Chapter End Notes

Felt like getting this up a bit early, since I have a busy Saturday ahead of me. And I noticed while editing - I think this one of the rare instances where Harry is in a good mood, and what do I do? Sorry, Harry.
Practical Applications

The two boys were crouched facing each other in an empty classroom, looking down at a string of carefully carved clay beads arranged in a near perfect circle on the stone floor between their feet. A twisting path of runes was carved along the beads; Harry’s eyes traced over them, filling in from memory the areas he could not see. He'd been over them at least twenty times from end to end, checking his work, but this was more complicated magic than he had ever written. A single rune out of place could be disastrous.

"Look, Harry," Severus said at last, settling back on his heels with a huff. "I told you already: I don't see any errors. Syntactically, everything looks solid. You've explained the whole circle to me half a dozen times, and it matches what was in the book where you said it would and deviates in a controlled manner. As far as I can tell, everything is sound."

"But what if I've made a mistake?" Harry fretted, scrubbing at the back of his neck. "What if we've missed an open clause, or there's a missing rune, or something in the flow of the array—"

"Do you want to take it to Notaro?"

Harry tore his eyes from the beads. "You know I can't."

"Then either you activate it, or bin it," Severus said firmly. "We've both gone over your work, and neither of us has found anything like an error. You worked all those out before you started carving."

"But if I've done something wrong it could kill me," Harry said softly. "I've never done anything like this..."

Severus closed his eyes, looking less like he was bothered by the possibility and more like he was praying for strength. "Don't be ridiculous; it won't kill you. That's why I'm here, isn't it? If something goes wrong, Notaro's walked us through breaking someone else's casting a hundred times. I don't think anything is going to go wrong."

"And when was the last time you tried casting something like this?" Harry asked, half serious.

"Never," Severus said flatly, an answer that did nothing to quiet Harry's nerves. "But I have done experiments in potions, haven't I? And you've... You've been there for several to put up the shield charms when the cauldron starts to blow."

That wasn’t exactly reassuring. If Severus didn’t have a habit of brewing extra burn cream while filling the Hospital Wing’s stores for Slughorn, they would have both ended up in Pomfrey’s care at least twice a month, from Severus’s experiments.

"It's up to you," Severus went on. "But if you're not going to activate it, then we're going back up to the owlery to figure out why that spell didn't work on the birds."

Harry winced, shaking his head. He didn't want to think about their disappointing attempts at using legilimency on owls any more than he wanted to think about Severus's potions failures, not when he was about to attempt the most dangerous bit of magic he’d ever done.

"No," he said, as firmly as he could. "I have to try. This could be the key to being able to live normally."

"Then get on with it."
Harry took a deep, steadying breath, pushed every thought he could back behind the imaginary walls he’d built for occlumency, and let his mind be clear of anything but his senses: the sounds of their breathing and rustling of his robes as he raised his wand, the magic thrumming through Severus ready to leap if anything went wrong, the wards they had constructed around the room to keep any of the professors from figuring out what they were up to. His mind had to be emptied of any doubt. Only the ward and the spell could remain. He didn’t notice it, but he licked his lips as he readied himself, and only then, in that moment of absolute focus, did he speak:

*Ilummas Cantamen.*

If he hadn’t activated the notice-me-not ward with Professor Notaro two days before, he might have fainted when the magic came rushing out of him. It was more magic than he had used since—since the night in the Forbidden Forest when his patronus was the only thing between him and Sirius and a whole horde of Dementors. This was different: there was no will to live driving it, no emotion, no passion, just pure magic flowing away from him and sinking into the runes, coursing through them and running the circuits of the secondary and tertiary circles, the three dimensional array filling out in several directions at once—the magic of every spell he’d ever cast went into this, like levitating a thousand feathers or transforming every match in the world into a haystack made of countless needles—it was more than everything, every quidditch game in the wind and rain, every fight for his life against Voldemort, the Basilisk, the Dragon—

And still it kept drawing more and more, pulling from stores of magic Harry never knew he had, and even with his mind as empty as it was he thought it still might take more, take the blood running in his veins and the marrow filling up his bones—

Then it was over. The spell cut. His wand, still thrumming as though the expenditure had charged it, too, clattered to the floor, landing in the blackened circle that had marked itself on the stones, and the only reason why Harry didn’t follow it down was the arm that shot out to grab his shoulder firmly. The ward hummed, like a great beast of a cat purring as it cleaned it's paws of a bloody meal, and Harry was hypnotized by the circles the magic in it drew, by the sudden absence of the sense of his wand, which had landed in it's net—

“Harry—Merlin’s saggy—enneverate!”

Severus’s magic struck him like a bolt of electricity, and he shuddered. “I’m fine,” he slurred, trying to pull away. “I’m just—oof—”

He toppled back, landing on his butt, just out of reach as Severus tried to grab him again. A few seconds—minutes?—later Harry blinked up at the pale Slytherin several times, slowly, trying to get his eyes to focus and converge the repeated image of him into a single boy.

“Bloody hell,” Severus breathed out. “That was—”

“I have to try it,” Harry mumbled, reaching forward to grab at the beads, the motion stirring another wave of dizziness. Severus grabbed him again, holding him steady, only for Harry to be drawn into his magic. It was *burbling*, threatening to break free of the normally tight grasp he held it in, and Harry couldn’t resist a giggle as it tickled him through the sleeve of his robe. Normally Severus’s magic wasn’t particularly comforting, but right now…

“You’re delirious,” Severus said, and Harry wondered if he’d spoken his thoughts aloud. Maybe it was just the giggle. “You’re—holy *shat*, Harry. You never said it would be like—like that!”

“Said it could kill me, didn’t I?” Harry said. Rased. Severus’s grip tightened, and Harry would have squirmed, but his arm felt like lead, and he couldn’t seem to find the energy.
“If the circle was broken, and it wasn’t!” Severus snapped. “We both checked it. I’ve never seen anything activated like—like that!”

“Exploding cauldrons,” Harry said, face sliding into a sick smile. “Gotta dream big to get anywhere… you knew it was complex.”

“Complex, yes; requiring soul-sucking levels of magic, no!”

“It didn’t suck my soul,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. He almost knew what that felt like, after all, thanks to the dementor incident, and while this was certainly draining it wasn’t anywhere close to having his soul tugged at. He managed to sit up straighter, reaching for the ward with his other arm, but Severus grabbed that one too.

“Sit still! You’re practically drained—”

“I just need some sleep,” said Harry. “And that’s not happening until I see if it worked—”

“You are not trying that on now!”

“It can’t make anything worse.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Yes, I do!” They glared at each other for a moment, and Harry managed to pull one arm free. “It’s its own thing, Sev. The ward is complete. It won’t drain me anymore—it can’t. Closed circuit. You know spell circles. If it’s anything like the other one was, it’ll make things better.”

“How could it possibly—”

“My magic is short, because it’s all running through that,” Harry said, gesturing towards the beads—still out of reach. Damn. “If I put it on, it will be like… like it’s part of me, again.”

“How do you know it won’t—”

“That’s what happened when I put on the notice-me-not,” Harry explained, as best he could. “And Professor Notaro didn’t think it was strange at all when I was dizzy, and this isn’t that much worse…”

That was a lie, and an obvious one that earned him Severus’s wary look. But he glanced back down at the beads, and back up to Harry, whose eyes were feeling so heavy again, and seemed to make up his mind, letting go of Harry’s other arm as well. “Fine,” he said, not bothering to steady Harry as he had another moment of disbalance. “You want to put it on… fine. But if anything goes wrong I’m going to get Professor Notaro.”

“I don’t go running for Sluggy whenever your cauldrons explode,” Harry retorted, even as he reached eagerly for the ward.

“You don’t have to,” Severus began, and went on, but Harry wasn’t listening, because as soon as he grabbed the beads, his fingers slipping through the web of the ward, it began to climb up his arm, and Harry felt—Harry felt—

Complete.

“That’s it,” Severus’s voice broke through, after a moment that seemed to stretch out forever. “I’m going to get—”
“Don’t,” Harry whispered.

“Harry, you’re crying! Tears! You can’t tell me…”

Harry blinked, and brought his left hand to touch his face. Oh, yes, there were tears there, weren’t there? But more important, he could feel the ward, and beyond that…

“It’s so… quiet,” he said softly. “Severus, you can’t… it’s so…”

Rather than leave to find a Professor, Severus made a swipe at the chain of beads. Harry yelped, clutching them to himself possessively, toppling back. “Stop!” he nearly shouted, unable to control himself. “Sev, you don’t—”

“I don’t what?” Severus demanded. He sounded angry, but he looked… scared. Harry didn’t like that look on him, and he struggled to explain.

“It’s the calm after a storm,” he said. “The smell of grass growing after rain in Surrey. It’s…” He looked down, and, as if in a trance, pulled the beads more firmly up his arm, and used his other hand to twist them about, wrapping the string several times into a bracelet as Notaro had done before. “It’s peace,” he murmured. “The magic—it’s there, but it’s… it’s not screaming at me anymore. Don’t you see?”

He looked up again, meeting Severus’s fearful black eyes with an honest smile. “It worked, Severus. It’s so… It’s so quiet.”

↔

Early the next morning, which was Monday, December the 20th, Harry woke with a start, gasping from a dream he couldn’t remember. Blindly he fumbled about in the dark, wincing as he hit his hand on the sharp corner of his bedside table, running his fingers over the drawer and the book and the papers and the half-empty mug of water until he finally found his glasses and settled them on his face. His wand, grasped firmly as it ever was in the hand that had been tucked away under his pillow, came up, and Harry muttered something unintelligible as he gave it a sleepy flick. A cloud of softly glowing mint-green smoke issued from the tip, and writhed about in the air until it twisted into numbers, the last digit steadily changing:

355:04:26:32… 33… 34…

There were some practical applications to spending a year studying time magic, after all.

Harry batted the cloud away, glancing around the dormitory. He was the only occupant for the holiday, not just of his room but the whole of Ravenclaw tower, though from the look of the room, it didn’t seem like he could be the only one. Papers littered the stone floor, and books, too, arranged splayed out in circles around two empty spots, where until midnight Harry and Severus had sat furiously scribbling to complete Harry’s report for Professor Notaro on the notice-me-not ward. Harry had promised Severus he would return the favor at the Slytherin’s convenience, a fee that was taken up most eagerly, and so Severus had found Harry quotes and citations to support his write-up while Harry blearily composed it into a mostly cohesive explanation of his portable ward experiment. Then Severus had taken the whole stack of parchment from Harry and started marking it for spelling and grammar, and Harry had stumbled to bed with the intention of a short nap.
Severus, apparently, hadn’t woken him before he left. But then, he had spent all evening watching Harry like he was convinced he was going to collapse, nagging him to get some rest.

Slowly Harry peeled himself from the indent he’d left on top of the thick blue comforter, his socked feet finding purchase on the floor as he wiped sleep from his eyes. He waved his wand with another poorly-enunciated spell, and the glass orbs that were attached to the walls at even intervals around the octagonal room filled with a soft light, enough that he could see clearly without having to squint. He took uneven steps for his feet to land in the empty gaps of floor between his research materials and the amalgamated notes and diagrams, and eventually managed to locate the stack he needed. Fanning through the pages, he found that between the lines of his uneven print ran Severus’s spiky scrawl. On the last page, there was a larger note:

—Use the dict-a-quill I got you this summer to recopy this, or they won’t even be able to read it, let alone grade it, you slob.

Harry stretched to put the stack of parchment safely on the end of his bed, and glanced around the mess without thinking much of it. His heart was still racing from the dream, whatever it had been, and he absently brought his hand up to rub his forehead. It was smooth as ever, the scar tucked safely away into his hairline, and it didn’t hurt, but dreams with intense emotions tied to them would probably always scare him. He couldn’t remember what emotions they had been. The dream had left him entirely, nothing but racing blood to let him know it had been there at all.

And then there was the matter of the ward wrapped around his wrist and body. It was a relief to not wake up to an overabundance of awareness of the magic in the school, for once, but while he could still feel it, the magic was like an echo—music heard at a distance. Between the empty school and the absence of magic and the dwindling traces of the dream, he felt strangely like he was drifting in a void.

Presently, he became aware of a tapping. It wasn’t unusual for the castle to creak and groan in the night, but this was nearer. Harry frowned and strained his senses through the null ward wrapped around his wrist, pushing out and feeling the magic, still there, humming through the castle walls—

The tapping sounded again, and Harry lost his focus as he jumped. He tried to take a step to steady himself, only for his foot to land on a loose sheet of parchment, and he slipped, falling back against the wooden frame of Hector’s empty bed, which jabbed painfully into his back but slowed him from his graceless fall to the floor. Sighing and straightening himself, Harry glared at the mess they’d left, and raised his wand to pack it all away—

The tap sounded again, halting him. This time it was accompanied by a shadow of movement in the corner of his eye, and Harry turned his head, squinting into the darkness beyond the window—

Two wide yellow eyes reflected back at him. It would be a lie to pretend that Harry’s breath did not catch with sudden, irrational fear.

The owl tapped again, and Harry shook his head, pulling himself up. Trust him to be startled by an owl. There were worse things to be startled by—an eagle at the breakfast table came to mind—but it didn’t stop him from feeling grumpy about it. Who sends an owl to be delivered before the sun was even up? Who sent an owl directly to someone’s bedroom window, when all mail was supposed to go through the Great Hall or owlery? How was that even possible?

Bloody Dark Lords.

He contemplated leaving it out on the window ledge, but the bird tapped the glass again, tilting its head nearly sideways as it blinked curiously at Harry. He didn’t recognize it. A simple barn owl, it’s
heart-shaped white mask bobbed about as it canted its head, as if trying to figure out what was keeping him. With a huff, Harry went to let it in.

“I’m not going to pet you,” he told it as he untied the letter from its patiently lifted leg. “The last one I got attached to got turned into a quill.”

The bird blinked at him, then hopped about on the ledge until it found a good position to take off, swooping down towards the Forbidden Forest and where it was quickly swallowed by the darkness.

Harry shut the window and looked warily down at the letter in his hand. It was making his finger prickle with magic, the direct skin-to-envelope contact putting it fully in his senses, through the ward, but it was nothing more than the last two letters had carried. He wondered why Voldemort had begun to add the charm—maybe he had thought Harry would have burned the first letter if he’d noticed any magic on it, but now? Whether Harry wanted to admit it or not, Voldemort could be fairly certain that he would read and make some effort to respond to whatever was sent his way. It was only a matter of when he opened it, and he wondered why Voldemort would care.

Well, perhaps he could return the favor for the irritatingly early letter by breaking the seal now. If he had any luck at all, the Dark Bastard would still be attempting sleep, and the return of magic as he broke the seal would be a rude enough awakening.

Mr. Harrigan,

We have discussed previously the appropriate manner in which you are to address me, which you should follow even (or perhaps especially) in so personal a communication as a letter. After all, it is always in a young man’s favor to conduct himself with dignity and address his betters with appropriate respect. Do mind you keeper’s words on the matter; he seems to have a firm grasp on the subject, despite his own caustic touch. After all, he understands that without Lucius’s favor, he too would have to check his tongue, and I am afraid after your woeful first impression, you cannot hope to charm dear Lucius as he has.

Amusing as your paltry endeavors are, they are also without the level of professionalism this task requires. You do your friends no favors by attempting to shield them from my gaze. Of course, you appear to be lingering under the continued delusion that this is a conflict in which individuals will be able to simply ‘sit out’. A naive assumption, Mr. Harrigan, one that marks you as more a child than an adult. A pity that your recent ascension into majority was not coupled with an introduction to common sense. You would do well to learn quickly.

Take for example your multiple muggleborn acquaintances, whose blood status you attempt to weave into a ward against me. Do you think you are doing them some favor? They maybe be as incapable of overcoming their nature as a werewolf is incapable of overcoming the moon, but like a wolf set on a proper path, they have their uses. We are in the midsts of a war of the likes one as young as yourself would not yet know, Mr. Harrigan, and your muggleborns are intrinsically bound to it. You have the opportunity to beg for them a chance to prove their worth, rather than waste their negligible magical blood in premature deaths.

Perhaps, however, you simply do not understand the nature of the upcoming conflict. You were, after all, terribly preoccupied by your supposedly fairy-wine triggered crowd shyness at the Hallow’s Eve meeting, and do not seem to have processed the message we shared that night. But Lord Voldemort is merciful and forgiving, even to young men and their petty distractions, and willing to offer you yet another chance to absolve yourself of your ignorance.
You and Mr Snape have no doubt received invitations from the Malfoys or the Blacks to join in their New Year’s Eve festivities. While you are surely looking forward first and foremost to the enjoyment of a good party and Lucius’s favorite fairy wine, dear Abraxas does have some sense to set aside space for the more focused among my cohort to gather and speak on important matters without the distraction of the noise dear Lucius calls ‘music’—or, as you will perhaps value, the crowds. We shall send for you to be collected from the foyer ballroom at the appropriate time, and you will be introduced to a wizard with more patience than I, who will explain the conflict in far more simplistic terms than I have the time to pen for your remedial education.

And, of course, I have not forgotten the matter of your scar. Your concise summary of the results of your consultation of Lysander’s Treatise is as disappointing as your previous letter. Do consider the wisdom of your actions, Mr. Harrigan. For your friends’ sake.

V

Harry stared at the letter for a long time, and finally threw it down on the bed in disgust. He ought to be terrified at it, if he had been so easily spooked by an owl, but instead he was just angry. Not the sort of anger he’d felt so regularly before the time travel, but the sort that was raw and righteous and came along with its own brand of frustration.

Could he ask ‘who do you think you are’ of someone like Voldemort? Was it more presumptuous to declare that the bloody Dark Lord could not be human, for how he acted, or that he was, with all of humanity’s worst traits? And did it matter either way? Did Harry truly have any agency—

No, he would not let Voldemort take that from him. He had staked his entire life since falling back in time on a belief in free will, and that belief was the only thing justifying his actions. If he did not believe in that, he should leave right now for Dumbledore’s office and lay bare everything he knew of the war and the future. Either it would continue on its path and change nothing, or he would save his parents and destroy everything he had known—but his conscious would be clean.

He had to believe he was doing the right thing.

He watched his unsteady breath fog the window when he purposefully exhaled. He had chosen his course, and he would stick to it, doing everything in his power to not interfere until he found his way home, to not sway the course of the war and time itself. But how? How would he disentangle himself from Voldemort’s web without making things worse? He clenched his teeth and turned away from the window, stopped from pacing by the mess still spread out on the floor. He may not be able to aid the fight, but he would not be a malleable minion in Voldemort’s hands, either. Voldemort could not control him. Leastwise not through letters. Oh, Harry would play the part of the cowed pen-pal, but only so long as it was the less-intrusive option.

Folding the letter and sliding it carefully back into its envelope (the controlled alternative to the swift incendio his heart screamed it deserved), Harry sealed with it two decisions. The first: he would not show Severus this letter. While he had needed all the help he could get to recover from the threat carried in Isis’s bloodstained feather, he did not need to deal with Severus casting judgement on his choices. The second: no matter how Voldemort threatened, he would not be attending the New Year’s gathering, or willingly put himself in the Dark Lord’s path ever again.

He would not be a bloody pawn. Not on this board where he did not even belong.
As Notaro had predicted, the Monday after the rest of the school went on holiday Harry and Severus were once again recruited by Slughorn to replenish the infirmary’s stocks (Lazy bastard, Harry caught Severus muttering, but they were both for want of galleons, with apparition lessons rumored to be starting after the hols). On top of that, to make up for their lightened load of homework, Severus poured himself into testing more aspects of Harry’s magic sensing, which Harry went along with in order to further learn the limits of the newly-activated null ward he wore wrapped around his right arm. And when they weren’t experimenting, they were struggling with legilimency (behind heavily warded doors, lest any of their professors sought them out). Severus even followed Harry to the kitchens for meals, seeing as they were a few flights of stairs closer to the Potions lab, and Hani could not bring herself to kick Harry out when she found it tear-jerking that Harry was spending time with real human friends (never mind Harry’s insistence that she was just as a real a friend as any human could possibly be and his embarrassment when Severus raised an eyebrow to her good intentions). They were together most all all of the time, pushing the limits of their ability to coexist with their opposing personalities, and it was apparently noticed by the castle’s limited occupants.

In fact, it was noticed to the extent that when Harry was went searching for a specific book on properties of potions ingredients Floyd and Kirke, the Hufflepuff couple from the revision group, pulled Harry off into an empty classroom for a chat.

“Look, Harrigan, we don’t mean to pry,” Kirke began.

“Are you and that Snape bloke a thing or not?” Floyd demanded.

“A… thing?” Harry echoed. The Hufflepuffs exchanged a long glance.


“…me and—I—you—Severus?”

Were they actually suggesting that he and Severus were…? It was laughable, for a moment, then just disgusting. This was the future Professor Snape they were speculating about! While Harry could divorce the seventies and nineties enough to tolerate Severus now, whenever he did get back to the nineties, he doubted he and Snape would have anything beyond their usual mutually antagonistic words to share. And there were going to be some long, long conversations they would be having, in that future.

“Look, you don’t have to tell us,” said Kirke, though Floyd looked like he disagreed. “We just wanted you to know that we’re here. You’re not alone. If you need someone to talk to, Finn and I—we’ve been through a lot.”

“I’m not—Severus and I aren’t—we aren’t even—I don’t even know if we’re friends!”

“Seem like a lot more than just friends, that’s for certain,” Floyd said with a grin, erased shortly thereafter following the connection of Kirke’s elbow to his gut.

“Really, Harrigan, we don’t mean to back you into any corners. But sometimes you might need to talk to someone, someone who understands what it’s like… So if you need to, you know where to find us,” Kirke said earnestly. He then pulled Floyd out of the room with him, leaving Harry to gape after them. Him and Severus? Really?

It was only after he actually made it to the library that Harry even realized he hadn’t denied fancying
blokes, just Severus. He didn’t—did he? He knew he fancied girls… well, sort of. He’d had a snog with Cho and while he’d thought he liked her, the whole experience had been rather underwhelming. But maybe that was more from the lecture he’d received from Hermione about complex emotions right after, or maybe the fact that Cho had been crying over Cedric at the time. But there was also Ginny. He’d thought she was pretty… in a brotherly sort of way, of course, or Ron would probably sock him. Pandora? She was undeniably beautiful, but kissing her? The thought made Harry cringe. Maybe he didn’t…

But blokes—he didn’t fancy them either, right? Well, certainly not Severus—he’d rather kiss an acromantula than Severus Snape.

So maybe he didn’t like either. It would probably make his life a whole lot easier, without that drama; he just couldn’t bring himself to care either way, at the moment.

Safe as he was in the knowledge that he didn’t want to kiss Severus, there was another, more important matter to deal with. He hadn’t lied, and he’d had the thought before, but he didn’t think he could rightly say he was friends with Severus. Friends were what he considered Ron and Hermione, people who he loved like family, who he still was kept awake at night wishing that this time, he might go to sleep and wake up to find them there. They were people who he trusted with his life, whose opinions on things were enough to make him reconsider his own, and who, most of all, he could find reason to laugh with on a daily basis, so long as they weren’t fighting. People who he wouldn’t have to lie to… which meant, essentially, no one in the seventies except Hani. He liked Hector and Pandora, but when their whole relationship was built on a sham, it made things difficult.

Severus was none of those things. It wasn’t that he didn’t care for Sev—he was stuck caring, whether he wanted to or not. But neither of them would ever admit the companionable element of their association. Sometimes they got along in good humor, but usually when they connected emotionally it meant that something had gone terribly wrong. Still, Harry felt like he knew Severus in a way he didn’t know anyone else in this time, and not just because he knew the man Severus would become as Professor Snape, in the future. No, it was something deeper. Something almost intimate, only in a detached, and therefore paradoxical, impossible to comprehend, way.

He couldn’t find an answer, no matter how he put his mind to it, so he located the text they needed, filled out the book card under Pince’s watchful eye, and wandered back down to the dungeons.

“I’ve decided,” Severus said, as soon as Harry had shut the door behind him. “You’re going to have to cast the spell on me.”

Harry paused, frowning. Severus was, of course, referring to legilimens. They had been attempting it on animals so far, up in the owlery and once with a live rat Hani had caught for them. “But none of our trials have worked.”

“They haven’t hurt anything, either. You brought the book? Look up blisterwort, and tell me if it is listed as an ingredient for any sleeping potions.”

“But it hasn’t worked against them, either… so we don’t know how to—here it is… No; no sleeping potions.”

“Hm. Give it here.”

Harry passed the book over. He was used to Severus’s constant need to double-check Harry’s work by now. While it could be annoying, it didn’t really hurt anything, and on more than one occasion had saved Harry’s grade. This time, however, Severus just nodded and set the book aside, gesturing to a small piles of leaves assembled on a cutting board with a silver potions knife. “Chiffonade those
—with gloves, and keep each leaf separate from the others.”

“Chiffonade?”

“Roll up and—”

“I know what it means. Are we making a potion or dinner?”

“...shut the hell up and cut the bloody leaves.”

Harry set to work, but was undeterred from Severus’s declaration. “Sev, a person’s mind is... I mean, your mind is probably more complex than an owl’s. If I can’t get into one of theirs, yours...”

“Mine is a human mind, which is what the spell was intended for. What happened to all your bravado from last weekend?”

“You know what happened. A fat lot of nothing.”

“Exactly. I’m not going to sit around twiddling my thumbs—is that the finest you can cut that? Really?”

“You want them finer you can bloody well cut them yourself.”

“You’re not getting paid to loiter.”

“And you’re not getting paid to make experiments out of potions that are actually going to be used in the infirmary. Should I tell Professor Slughorn?”

They glared at each other for a moment, then each turned back to his own work. Harry did his best to try and narrow his cuts. He didn’t think Severus would ever experiment in a way that could actually be dangerous when people were going to be ingesting his work—at least, not when it could be traced back to him. He was too proud to let his reputation be besmirched like that. He’d even had Harry go get the book, so he could be certain his instinctive addition was safe, which he never did when they were brewing for class.

“We need to make progress on your occlumency,” Severus said after a few minutes of silence. “And mine, probably, as well. Since you’ve decided to go keeping secrets about unusual magical powers and insulting the Dark Lord at the same time.”

Harry couldn’t find a good response to that. “I just don’t want to get it wrong and, you know, screw up your brain. What should I do with these?”

“Give me one of the leaves.”

Harry collected one of the little piles of the shredded greens and passed it to Severus who, with practiced hand, carefully distributed the pieces evenly across the surface of the potion. As they settled, both boys waited with baited breath and a hand on their wands. The pieces slowly sank into the liquid, but did no more than turn the concoction a pearlescent blue. They sighed out relief, then shrugged off the trained anxiety of potential cauldron explosions.

“Now they sit for ten minutes. Pass me the rest, and powder the bicorn horn—no, you imbecile, the curved one. One measure for each of the cauldrons... one horn should do. I recommend Friday.”

“What?”

“For you to attempt legilimency.”
“Oh. Not today?”

“It’s the Solstice; I do want at least the evening off.”

“The solstice?” Harry echoed, frowning. He’d never thought Severus cared much for astronomy, but then again they’d never had the class together, and had already taken their OWLs when they first started their strange studying arrangement. “So? What does that have to do with anything?”

Severus’s hands paused over a cauldron, though he quickly regained himself and continued scattering the shredded blisterwort. “What does it have to—it’s celebration is only the oldest lasting magical tradition on record,” he grumbled. “You might not celebrate it, but you’re an all-around heathen.”

“Uh, right. And you’re not?”

Severus turned back to the first cauldron, rolling his eyes as he took up his stirring rod again. “And we should finish all our brewing first. If we end up in the hospital wing…”

“At least we’ll have been paid.”

“Precisely.”

“Glad you have so much faith in my skills—is this fine enough?”

“Grind it for the whole ten minutes.”

“Ten min—my wrists were not designed for this!”

“Stop whining. We’ll try it on Friday, assuming we finish by then, which means no wasting time griping.”

“…is that supposed to be smoking?”

“You only cut the blisterwort on this board, right?”

“Yes…”

“Then it should be—shit, down—protego!”

“Everything alright, boys?”

Harry and Severus, crouched behind a desk and Severus’s hastily thrown up shield charm wrapped in a bubble over the explosion, looked over their shoulders, finding Slughorn standing in the doorway. He was holding a sparkling Christmas card singing ‘Santa Baby’ at him, and seemed unconcerned by the poorly contained cauldron filling it’s bubble with a thick, puce-colored smoke, smiling down at them. “Yes, Professor,” they chorused, straightening up.

“Well, come look here then! Dear Cassius McKinnon—that’s our head girl’s older brother, chaser for the Falcons, you know—has sent me this lovely photo, look…”

“Friday,” Harry agreed under his breath as they reluctantly trucked over to look at Slughorn’s spoils. “If you don’t get us killed before then.”

“…shut up.”
Sir (yes: sir, which as I have previously explained is the most appropriate term for me to address you with),

While I appreciated Lord Black’s invitation, as I have already written him I unfortunately have pre-existing commitments for celebrating the holidays and so will not be available to attend the Malfoy’s no-doubt magnificent party. If they spend half as much on extension charm permits as they must have for the Hallow’s Eve gathering, it will no doubt be the affair of the season for the party-going sort of people.

My sort is far more tame. We keep our celebrations light-hearted and non-educational and free of depressing discussions about things like war and politics. Seeing as I have absolutely no interest in either of those topics, my absence will save your very patient-sounding wizard a purposeless dry throat.

Probably equally unfortunately, I can’t provide you additional information without knowing what it is you are looking for, and even if I knew, it would probably take me a good deal of time once the term starts up again to find your answers. I am, after all, a poor judge of character and don’t really know most of them very well. I did come to Hogwarts with the goal of completing my education, not to vaguely spy on my classmates or investigate curse scars, so I haven’t exactly been looking into that sort of thing. I’m not even sure what other information you would like me to provide in relation to that, since both myself and Severus (who has none of the reservations I do, apparently) examined the scar as directed by the book, and neither of us found any information useful to us. I could make up a harrowing story, if you are only looking for entertainment, but somehow I imagine that there are more entertaining ways to spend your time. At least, I hope. Lord Malfoy does seem like an entertaining sort of guy, if his parties are anything to go by.

Harrigan

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Harry swallowed when Severus nodded, his trademark sneer stretching his lips across his pale face.

“Get on with it already, Harry.”

“But are you—”

“For the last time, yes!” Severus snarled.

“Alright, just…” He heaved out a heavy breath and steadied his wand. “...Legilimens.”

Nothing.

“For Merlin’s sake, are you asking or telling?” Severus snapped. “Remember the part where you need to check your occlumency in case you somehow manage to run into the very powerful and ruthless Dark Lord you deigned wise to piss off? Fucking intention, Harry. Employ it. Merlin.”
“Right,” said Harry meekly, and he raised his wand again, shying under the renewed glare.

Severus was right, of course; this was no time to make half-hearted efforts. As wrong as it felt to be trying legilimency on Snape of all people (which he feared meant choosing to relive the horrors that the lessons in the nineties had ended up as, a fate he wouldn’t wish on anyone, even the boy behind the man) protecting his secrets from Voldemort was more important than his or Snape’s discomfort. He hadn’t told Severus about the last letter he’d received, nor the response he’d sent, but after re-examining it in more reasonable hours he was growing suspicious that Voldemort would find a way for him to end up at the party whether he wanted to be or not. This was Hogwarts, and he wanted to feel like that was enough to keep him safe, but Voldemort had gotten to him at Hogwarts three times already, and after Isis’s death… Well. If he was somehow forced into the company of the Death Eaters on New Year’s Even, he needed to be ready.

Taking a deep breath, Harry closed his eyes and tried to remember what legilimency felt like when Snape had cast it on him. He hadn’t been able to sense magic then, but the feeling of someone else riffling around in his mind was unforgettable. And there was the one time he’d managed to push back, into Snape’s own memories, but Harry wasn’t sure how he’d done that, so he focused on what it had felt like used on him instead. It wasn’t unlike having unwanted thoughts that he couldn’t ignore—worse, it was like something forcing his brain to remember things, like a hand turning his head towards a thousand television screens and forcing him to watch. Occlumency, in the same metaphor, was not as he once thought the act of shutting off the power to all of the televisions at once, but running interference, so the screens showed static-blurred images and the volume dial got stuck too low to hear—or recovering only the screens that were safe for the legilimens to see, drawing their focus while keeping the rest hidden.

He doubted that the television metaphor would carry over to Severus’s mind. The occlumency book had explained that every mind was different, and there were probably no two so different as Harry’s and Severus’s. But the sense of intruding into every thought Severus was having and every image he remembered, that was what Harry had to grasp.

“Harry?”

He opened his eyes again, and met Severus’s glinting black ones. He’d never been able to read Severus’s emotions from his eyes, but that was what the magic was for, wasn’t it? Steadying his wand and focusing—incantation and intent—he tried again. “Legilimens!”

It was—a feeling? A thought. All of them at once. Dizzying, surrounding, not his—

Too much—

It was just like magic, Severus’s mind. Harry took a long, deep breath. He knew how to deal with an overabundance of magic. Slow down. Separate. Identify. Analyze. It was what he’d been learning to do all year—along with occlumency, which really was learning to control an overabundance of thoughts, no metaphors or similes required. He understood, staring steadily into Severus’s black eyes and seeing (but not really seeing) what it had meant, for Snape to have been so proficient at legilimency. Of course Dumbledore had said there was no more proficient occlumens to teach Harry, but that had only been words he hadn’t wanted to hear, and now—

Now he had an idea, a theory. Legilimency, the art of occluding someone else’s mind. When he thought about it like that, Harry knew he could handle it. He’d never been introspective, but he was learning; dealing with other people’s jumbled thoughts would have to be easier than facing his own.

If only he could push past the nausea of it all.
It was… strange, to say the least, when he finally managed to pin down single thread—thought?—and was greeted with the sensation of hair brushing against his shoulders when he knew very well his hair was not long enough to reach that. It was like wincing over the sight of someone else getting injured, paired with an imagined pain, only that pain would linger… The purest form of empathy. He pushed by. This must be the surface of Severus’s mind, filled with impulses and sensations that would normally be ignored as white noise. But it was also stained with more prevailing things—confusion, discomfort, strain—and littered with bursts of sudden emotions, like spell lights that dulled not a second after they shone—and some of them seemed to take root as they dimmed, branching out into new bursts—and there were strange images, his own face skewed and blurred and highlighted—and there were words. Lots of words. There was probably a clear train of thought in there, but they were all jumbled together, and even when Harry ‘heard’ one clearly he had trouble making sense of the sounds, as though it suddenly meant something different from how he understood it. And there were voices layering the language; a distortion of Severus’s, of his, of Regulus’s and Lily’s and others he didn’t recognize through the mess of it all.

He could have spent hours trying to make sense of this. Maybe he did… it was hard to tell. Hard to keep track of his own body like this, and while Severus’s mind was the one being looked into it was Harry who was feeling incredibly vulnerable. He could at least tell that much. As fascinating as this was, it wasn’t legitimacy as Harry had experienced it, racing through memories that had been previously buried. Focusing as he might if he were trying to follow a single thread of magic, he isolated one of the fragments of thought and pushed the spell into it, following the trail of branches that burst forth, only allowing half a thought for the images and sounds and smells and feelings in following it’s path…

It wasn’t like the time he’d pushed back into Snape’s mind at all. Maybe because he had an intent, and he was ignoring the sensations around him… but there were so many, and the abundance threatened to overload him if he did not make some sense of it…

It came to Harry that if Severus’s mind were a physical place, he would be chasing a will-o-wisp down a long hallway lined with paintings, and the farther he got, the more the paintings were distorted, images abstracted, all the paint losing its color and tint. Harry stopped his chase, letting the trail of the thought he’d been chasing disappear into the distance, winking out in the imagined darkness. This wasn’t so unlike the metaphor he had groped for earlier; an endless stretch of television screens would in the wizarding world be an endless stretch of paintings. Occlumency wasn’t about controlling what the mind was, but creating an interpretation, a lense, and enforcing it. Harry wasn’t sure if this was his interpretation of Severus’s mind or Severus’s, but he’d had a theory when he started this. Legilimency, the art of occluding someone else’s mind. He took the idea and ran with it, forcing his interpretation into an imagined reality, and turned in the hallway, examining the paintings.

There were recurring themes in the images here. A woman of obvious relation to Severus, with sallow skin, dark hair that seemed to screen her face, a body that in gentle terms would be described as willowy but would perhaps more accurately be noted for its sharp lines and angles, for the straight limbs constantly folding in around her. A man whose deep-lined, large-nosed face was never quite shaved or bearded; whose body was hard with the sinew of labor but soft with a gut of indulgence; whose presence was clouded by the stench of sweat, saw dust, and alcohol; whose dirty blond hair nonetheless seemed to sit upon his head as a shroud of darkness. A town made of row houses of crumbling brick struggling for space against each other, overcast with the chimneys’ belches of black smoke trying to fight off a chill that went deeper than fire could warm. A house that seemed to be sinking in on itself, tall ceilings and narrow walls, twisting uneven stairs threatening to splinter apart with every step, glass and wallpapers stained green with cigarette smoke, half-shuttered windows never letting light in or keeping sounds out.
There were flashes of color around the edges, spell lights through the thick gaps under doors, red and green and blue and gold. Summer blue skies reflected in smoother patches of the polluted river, only to be carried away. Leaves and flowers fading out of season. Robin redbreasts and copper hair darting out of the edge of frames. The color felt like a secret thing, with how it clashed against the dullness of the town—even in a muggle classroom filled with children, their faces blurred caricatures, turning to stare with strangely defined hyper-realistic and judging eyes, the bold colors that should have painted the clothes and walls in the childhood space were muddied.

Harry reached closer to that image. He could feel the flush of embarrassment, voice stumbling over words that he should have been able to read—words he’d read while half these cockroach children were still learning how to put their words into sentences, but were tying his tongue into knots like the hex he’d read in Mother’s book. His voice was stumbling, and all around him was the whispering …

Harry pulled away. He had similar memories of his own, from primary school where he’d never known what was safe and what would get Aunt Petunia angry at him and where Dudley had convinced everyone he was an idiot who only pretended to be smart so whenever he answered a question correctly his classmates had whispered and stared.

Instead he cast about for a different memory, brushing by the varied paintings. By now they had solidified more securely into that form, perfectly tessellated on the stone walls with different frames. One in particular stood out to him. It was tall and narrow, framed in a tarnished metal frame flaking with some sort of grime, spotted with dark stains he did not want to think too hard about. Harry drew close to it, and could hear raised voices, but it was as if they were arriving through a broken radio across a great distance, the words impossible to distinguish. Curious, he lifted a hand—proof that this visualization was near completion, if he was physically a part of it, he thought—and pressed his fingers to the surface. For a moment it rippled—

and he was crouched on the stair, leaning against the top step, pressed into the shadows and peering through the long, narrow gap of the barely open door. There were prints staining the dusty floorboards dark, leading up to the bed, where Father sat, peeling off his boots and wet socks and taking a swig from a bottle of muddy-brown liquor. Mother stood, half-hidden behind the door, Father’s shadow falling on her feet, her big toe a bright spot through a hole in her greyed woolen stockings.

“And what’s he supposed to wear to school? How am I supposed to put food on his plate when you waste your paycheck on that hipp—donkey piss?”

He’d come up because he was hungry, and Father had a brown sack like what they bagged food up from the grocer in, but all that had come out was another bottle. There was a lady one row up from Spinner’s End who’d give him a ha’pence for the empty bottle, but that’d be tomorrow maybe, and he was hungry now. Maybe he’d sneak out the back and down to the Murray’s, see if there was anything left to scrounge from the waspish lady’s garden. But it was raining and Mother would know he’d gone out. She’d nag him for stealing, but she’d cook what he brought the same and if he sounded sorry enough she’d let him at it sooner. ‘Cept Father was home, and looking to get sloshed, and even so he had a heavy hand with the belt, and would sooner throw Mother’s cooking into the bin than let them eat food he hadn’t earned.

“Well, maybe you can do something worthwhile with that bloody witchcraft of yours. Summon him up some clothes.”

“It doesn’t work like that. I’ve told you a thousand times—”
Mother’s voice was getting louder. On the stairs, he pressed his palms into his ears, never mind the
dust they’d picked up from the floorboards, unable to look away even as he tried to escape the raised
voices, but through the ocean-sounds of his palms he could still hear their regular argument,
muffled, but he knew the words:

“Fat lot of good that does anyone. What’s the point of—”

“What’s the point of working if you’re just going to spend it all on booze?”

“Now listen here—”

“And don’t think I don’t know the tab at Finley’s—”

“You haven’t got any right talking at me like that, woman.” Father’s voice echoed harsh against the
brick walls as he stood up, shucking his sopping coveralls. The house was on the end of the row, so
there was a window that looked out on a dirt and ox-tongue field beyond it, and through it came a
flash of distant lightning. He pulled his hands away and started counting for the thunder, but Father
started talking again first. “I’m out there, day after day, earning a wage by the sweat of my back, the
only decent money coming into this house. You and that boy are practical layabouts, dawdling
around with your wand waving and silly incant—”

“He’s seven, Tobe. What do you expect?”

“I was that age, I was carrying papers.”

“No one’s got a paper subscription around here.”

“There’s plenty of work if a lad is looking.”

“He’s seven. And there isn’t any work, is there? Otherwise you’d hold a job for more than a month
—”

“Don’t start!”

“And me; what’d you have us do, then? Isn’t anyone looking for a maid or a cook, is there, and you
take offense with a woman working with numbers, heaven forbid she might start thinking like a man.
So what’ll it be, Tobe? If you’re gonna drink what coin we’ve got, and I’m not allowed any man’s
work, what women’s work will I do? Spread my legs like Brennan’s girl down at the—”

Father, standing there on gangly legs in only his Y-fronts and a sweat-stained shirt, swung out with
the hand that wasn’t holding the bottle, but before it could crash brutally into Mother’s face the door
slammed shut and Harry was sent toppling backwards, missing the stair and falling back, out of the
memory, out of the painting, out of the hall, out of Severus’s mind—

They stood in the classroom, facing each other and panting heavily. Harry tore his eyes away from
the Slytherin’s, staring down at his hands. They were shaking. Pale enough that the veins stood out
against them. Slick with sweat, but he couldn’t bring himself to uncurl his fingers from the wand. He
felt like he was going to sick up, even now that he was back in his blessedly singular mind. “I’m
sorry,” he said, because he had to, even if Severus wouldn’t want to hear it.

“The door never closed.”

Harry looked up as much as he could muster, focusing his eyes on Severus’s feet, where the scuffed
toes of his black trainers stuck out from his robes. “What?”
“The memory. I watched him break her jaw. The door never closed.”

Harry shuddered, but he understood. “You pushed me out.”

“Yes.” Severus sounded inordinately pleased with himself. As though he and Harry hadn’t both just watched his parents shouting back and forth. “Yes, I think I was beginning to get it. Occlumency, that is.”

“Of course you would be a natural at it,” Harry grumbled, but he couldn’t bring himself to be particularly upset.

“Those notes—in the book? From your… friend?”

Now Harry looked up, studying Snape’s face intently. He’d managed to forget that he’d left half his connection to Hermione in the book when he gave it to Severus, and he wasn’t sure if he appreciated being reminded. “What about them?”

“They mentioned lucid dreaming.” Harry nodded slowly. He hadn’t been sure what Hermione had been on about in that note. “I think there might be something to it. Not just hiding things, but changing them. Altering them. Showing exactly what you want to be seen. Things that didn’t happen at all.” Severus’s black eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and Harry had to look away again. “That’s taking it rather farther than the book ever suggested. A rather genius idea, your friend had.”

“Brightest witch I’ll ever know,” Harry muttered. He didn’t want to talk about Hermione, not with Severus. Then again, it was rather satisfying to know that Hermione, who Snape had once called an ‘insufferable know-it-all’ in class, was being recognized as a genius by the man. Well, the boy, at least.

“Again,” Severus said after a long silence.

“What?”

“Cast it again. Neither of us knew what we were doing, and I want a better understanding of what I’m getting into before I cast it on you.”

Harry flinched. He knew he absolutely needed to put his occlumency to the test, but he didn’t fancy another jaunt down memory lane when that lane was a hallway of shitty childhood angst he was intruding on in Severus’s mind. Physical and mental discomforts of legilimency aside, it felt wrong, simply wrong. “Are you sure you want me to… Do we have to?”

“Yes. You have nothing to complain about. You’re not the one with unwanted memories being dragged out.”

“...yet.”

“Yet.”

Harry sighed, trying to push aside another wave of nausea. Why on earth was Severus not more bothered by this whole experience? Severus was probably the most private person Harry knew, but Harry had just dredged up a less than pleasant memory of his early family life and Severus seemed entirely unbothered by it. He didn’t even like Harry, not really, not any more than Harry liked him. But still...

“We haven’t got all day, Harrigan.”
Whatever Severus’s nonchalance, Professor Snape was going to be pissed, when he realized Harry had seen that.

“Yes, yes, I get it. Shut up for a second.”

Harry took a deep breath and shoved everything extraneous aside, which said more about how much further he’d gotten in occlumency studying on his own than anything else. Funny how now, with him casting legilimens and Severus as the victim, he was doing better at clearing his mind than he did even once when Snape was ‘teaching’ him occlumency. Snape has always been so quick to the spell, springing it on Harry before he could possibly have a chance to ready himself, but Harry had to grope around for the feeling of it, pushing aside the sense of wrongness as he steadied himself to tear into someone else’s brain. He supposed by then Snape would have twenty years of practice on him, and their perceptions of right and wrong had always been rather… dissonant. Perhaps Severus wouldn’t find the casting so uncomfortable as Harry did.

Focusing as clearly as he could on his intent to jump into Severus’s mind, Harry opened his eyes and met Severus’s gaze again. “Legilimens.”

This time he did not linger in the surface level of Severus’s mind any longer than he had to. The words were clearer as they echoed around, and the confusion staining his mind before had been replaced with confidence, and the image of Harrigan standing there (red hair green eyes freckles to the boot chewing on his lip) was discomfiting, so Harry pushed past, chasing a chain of thoughts back, back, until he was in another painting lined hallway, and followed it until he found a dusty but bright wall of paintings. They were old, but worn in the way a well-loved book was worn, not left to grime and mold the way the paintings he’d found before had been. He took them all in quickly, not wanting to spend any more time on this spell than he had to, and found that glimmer of red flitting around several of the edges of the images. They were more obscured, this time; what people there were were all turned away—but he chose quickly and forced himself in, pushing his hand through—

He was watching them, but it wasn’t like he had meant to. He wasn’t trying to be a sneak. He was good at hiding, since the same boys that called him dirty names (like they could be better than him, them—those pathetic muggles) were the ones who would push him around and he wasn’t allowed to lose his temper and strike back. And he didn’t want to, either. They made him angry but he would never stoop so low to hit someone the way those stupid, cowardly… ingrates; mother had called muggles ingrates and knaves, the lot. So instead he found all the best places to hide. He knew which garden fences he could slip through to lose them, where exactly the row houses broke to alleys, how to disappear into shadows without using any magic at all...

Now he was safe in his hideaway on the river bank, tucked in between the roots and shielded by the dangling branches of an old willow tree, its leaves a curtain with gaps he could see and hear through, if anyone was coming. So he was watching them, the two girls on the other bank, but it wasn’t because he’d sought them out. He was minding his own business, wasn’t he, and why would he want anything to do with two muggles, anyways?

One was tall and skinny, probably two or three years older than him, her blond hair pushed back by a gaudy red hair ribbon with a bow, leaving her bony face free, the sharp lines of it clear from even across the river. The other girl was turned away, but she had coppery red hair that flowed free around her shoulders. It was by the hair that he recognized her, a child of his own age, though she was in Mrs. Odell’s class which had less homework but harder tests than Mrs. Downer’s—his—class did. They were the sisters that lived seven streets up, on the opposite end of their row, which was a much nicer row than his, every house in use, though not as nice as ten streets up, where the old mill owners had built their house and now all the bankers and accountants for the stores on the other side of the river lived. Father thought that was funny, that the rich tossers who’d scoffed at
anyone who earned an honest living on this side of the river were now moving over to ‘escape’. Escape what, Severus didn’t know; it wasn’t a big town and the only escape from it was to leave for London. Or Hogwarts, if you were him, but they weren’t. None of them were.

He didn’t think the girls were mill kids. Not many kids were, any more, and they were better dressed than any of the mill kids and certainly him.

He couldn’t quite hear what they were saying to each other, and every now and then the wind pushed the branches and fully blocked them from view, but they seemed quick to laughing. Then the red-headed girl started to take off her shoes and her knee-high socks, and Severus sat up a bit. She’d have to be daft, if she was planning to step in the river. It was thick, grimy water, and full of litter, and you were just as likely to step on a rusted old nail and get yourself—

Harry was pushed, tumbling forward, falling into the river and it’s rushing currents, deep and black and murky all around him, rushing—but more unnerving was the disjoint between the sudden echoing word, drowning, drowning, drowning, and the fact that he wasn’t drowning. He should have felt the cold of the water, the pain of suffocating, the fierce pressure twisting him about—but this was a parody of that. A cartoon. A—

A poorly constructed imagining. Harry heaved back out of Severus’s mind, panting, and glared at the other boy, who was looking entirely too triumphant. “That didn’t work,” he growled.

Severus frowned. “What? You’re out—”

“You wanted me to feel like I was drowning? I could tell that it was fake.”

“But it got you out!”

“A little finagling and I could have gotten back in. If I’d known what I was doing, I would have.”

“But you—”

Whatever it was Severus planned to argue, Harry didn’t hear, because all those sensations that he had noticed were missing suddenly struck him, and he doubled over—

“Think I’m going to be sick—”

Dizzy, he cast a wild eye around the room, spotted the fireplace as his best bet, stumbled over as quickly as he could, and emptied the contents of his stomach onto the half-burnt and -blackened logs. “Je— Merlin,” he heard Severus curse behind him. “What the hell, Harry…” But all he could do was continue to heave, until only spittle came out.

Eventually, he was able to grab the mantel and pull himself into a mostly upright position, staring incomprehensibly into the vomit he had expelled. After a long moment he raised his wand, and with a hoarse whisper incanted incendio.

The burst of flame made him jump back, and he toppled to the ground, quickly picking himself up when he heard Severus’s snort behind him, though the room was spinning as he clambered to lean heavily on the mantle again, the puke-fire blazing merrily in the hearth.

“A little over-zealous? I didn’t push you out that forcefully.”

“Not you,” Harry moaned.

“What?”
“The spell... ‘s making me sick.”

“The spell?”

“...cold.”

He heard Severus rustling in his robes behind him, drawing up his wand and casting a spell that ran through the bones of Harry’s fingers with a rush that made him heave into the fireplace again, though there was nothing left to come up.

“Oh, Circe’s bloody—that elf. Call it.”

“...what?”

“Call your elf. Now, Harry!”

Harry frowned, but straightened up and called for Hani, wincing a bit when she apparated into the room, even dulled as the magic was with a brief chill in the ward wrapped around his wrist. Her initial eager expression faltered when her wide eyes fell on Harry. He wondered how terrible he must look. Bad enough for her voice to fall to a whisper when she spoke, questioning: “Master Harry?”


Hani’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly, but she studied Harry’s face intently for a long moment before snapping her fingers, summoning from Merlin knows where a bar of Honeydukes’ best, it’s gold foil peeling back as it floated towards him.

“Thanks,” said Harry weakly, snagging it and taking a small bite from the corner. It reminded him rather terribly of his third year encounters with the dementors, when between Professor Lupin and Madame Pomfrey he’d eaten his weight in the stuff. Still, as the bit melted on his tongue it warmed him in a way the fire couldn’t.

Apparently satisfied, Hani spun around, pointing a small finger dangerously towards Severus. “What has you been doing to Master Harry?” she demanded.

Somehow, Severus managed to keep his expression schooled with boredom. “I haven’t been doing anything. He’s been casting on me—a spell that is entirely legal and could potentially save his life. He just caught onto it too quickly and overexerted himself.”

“It’s barely dark,” Severus scoffed. Harry choked a bit on his second bite of chocolate. “And, like I said, legal. Or do you presume to know more about the magic we practice than we do?”

It showed how little Hani cared for Severus in that moment that his question was met with only a withering glare. Had Harry asked that, she would have burst into tears and begged he not think her such a terrible elf. As it was, she turned back to him, her ears falling into something like pity.

“You is the one who is taking Master Harry to meet with nasty wizards. You is teaching him nasty magic.”

“It’s barely dark,” Severus scoffed. Harry choked a bit on his second bite of chocolate. “And, like I said, legal. Or do you presume to know more about the magic we practice than we do?”

“It’s alright, Hani,” he said quickly, before she could start on him. “Like Sev said. Just a bit of defensive training. You know, for secret keeping.” When she nodded somberly, he let out a breath of relief. No need for a Hogwarts elf to think he was practicing the dark arts within the castle, even an elf as loyal as Hani. Not that he was sure why he needed the chocolate to begin with, seeing as all they had done was legilimency. It wasn’t like he was facing a dementor or anything. “Thank you for the chocolate. Maybe... if you wouldn’t mind whipping up a cup of cocoa with dinner tonight? Just
to be safe. I’ll probably be right as rain after this.”

Her eyes narrowed again, but she nodded and disappeared, and Harry withheld his gag until she was entirely gone. Then he looked sharply up at Severus.

“Barely dark? We weren’t doing anything dark at all.”

“You know, with your eagerness to dive into experimentation with runic spells, I would have at least expected you to have tried a few little bits of blood magic,” Severus said, his eyes fixed sharply on Harry’s face for any reaction. Harry took another bite of chocolate, since his options were that or heave what he’d managed down up again. Blood magic was especially repulsive to him, seeing as the very mention brought an ache in the long white scar that ran down his forearm, where Wormtail had drawn his blood to revive Voldemort. The fire didn’t need any more vomit-fuel.

“Apparently not,” Harry said monotonously. “I’ve never heard legilimency classified as dark.”

“Yes, well, the ministry propagandist version pretending there’s clear lines of definition is bollocks.” Severus looked around and found a desk to lean up against, and Harry came away from the fire to perch himself atop another before the rest of the chocolate melted in his hand. The smoke smelled a bit, anyways—there was probably a better spell for disposing of vomit than incendio. He’d have to look it up… and if he got a strange look from Madam Pince for it, it wouldn’t be the first time. “It’s definitely dark, though. I’m curious as to how you even managed it, if you’ve really never used the dark arts,” Severus went on, when it was clear Harry wasn’t going to make any comments.

Harry could guess. Whatever connection he had to Voldemort through the scar had always made his relationship with the dark rather tumultuous. Harry was fairly certain that the connection was broken at the moment, since Voldemort had touched him and he’d been more worried about magical overload than falling over in pain. And there was that, too—Voldemort didn’t have any of Harry’s blood, so why had he been able to touch Harry at all? Were the blood protections his mother had worked around him as void as the scar?

Well, now wasn’t the time to worry about that. “I’ve always been good at defense,” he mumbled around another bite of chocolate.

“A grade doesn’t stand for anything in declaring a gift for the dark arts.”

“I don’t have a gift for—did you miss the part where I’m puking?”

“Not unusual for someone exposed for the first time.”

“Oh, I’ve had plenty of exposure,” Harry muttered.

Severus, apparently, took that for granted, eyes flicking up to Harry’s fringe. “Yes, you’ve had a curse scar your whole life.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What, then?”

“Dementors,” Harry said with a sigh, since that was safer than saying ‘I’m a parseltongue who was once bitten by a basilisk thanks to a cursed diary left behind by the dark lord which was trying to steal my best friend’s sister’s soul’. “I hate them, and they really like me.”

That earned him a strange look. “And when would you have run into a dementor enough to count as ‘plenty of exposure’?”
Shit. Luckily Harry had a mostly-truthful excuse: “My boggart’s a dementor. The Professor had me face one over and over again, to learn the patronus charm. Merlin, it was—”

“You can cast a patronus?” Severus cut in, starting up. “Show me!”

For a moment Harry was set to blindly obey, lifting up his wand, but then he caught himself and rolled his eyes, waving the chocolate. “I’m not exactly in the best state for casting powerful magic requiring me to summon happiness, Sev.”

“I suppose.” Severus wasn’t going to give up on that, Harry could see it, but for some reason… it seemed like a bad idea to summon his stag, considering that James was turning into one on the monthly and Severus was an irritatingly resourceful at gathering information. No wonder Voldemort liked him… eventually. “What else?”

Harry eyed him warily. Not that he didn’t trust Severus in the short term, but sharing even more of his strengths and weaknesses with the Slytherin boy who was going to become one of Voldemort’s favored Death Eaters didn’t seem a particularly brilliant idea. Besides, a lot of the things he had come in contact with were things he absolutely couldn’t mention. He couldn’t exactly tell Severus he’d fought a basilisk with a sword and a phoenix, or that he’d resisted Voldemort’s imperius.

“Oh, you know,” he said lamely. “I cast a mean protego.”

Severus snorted, but he still looked thoughtful. “Pathetic of an achievement as that is, you may be… somewhat right,” he admitted. “Do you know what makes the dark arts ‘dark’?”

“Ohhhhm.”

“Think magical theory. What are the standard components of a spell?”

Harry frowned. Magical theory was what made transfiguration so difficult. With charms, he could usually wing it by overcompensating with intention, but transfiguration required a careful balance or the spell could leave you with a half-hedgehog half-tea cozy inexplicably speaking perfect French… not that he’d ever made anything too mind-boggling. Ron had once managed to transfigure a full-sized goat head onto Seamus’s left shoe when they were supposed to be turning their quills into feather dusters. Professor McGonagall had been less than amused. Harry had managed to pass his OWLs well enough, though, so he knew the textbook answer.

“Subject, action, intent,” he summarized.

“Subject, action, caster. Are you a NEWT student or not?”

“Intent’s a part of caster. You knew what I meant.”

“Remind me never to pair with you in Transfiguration. Even Rosier is better than you, and he’s—”

“Sev.”

“Right, well, caster is what’s important here, so pay attention.”

“Sir, yes sir.”

“Normally ‘caster’ includes intent, image, power, tool, and technique,” Severus said, falling into a lecture tone not unfamiliar from the one he would someday use to teach potions even as he counted the parts off on his fingers. “In but in the dark arts, it requires a part of you. It’s called ‘sacrifice’—”
“Like blood.”

“Don’t interrupt me. It’s called ‘sacrifice’ or ‘commitment’ or ‘duty’, or any number of other terms depending on how esoteric the one explaining is. Sometimes it’s blood, yes. Blood would be a ‘libation’, if you don’t mind irritating religious historians with the reappropriation of their word, but blood is never used alone. Mostly physical sacrifices are... more a binder for a different part of yourself.”

“And by ‘part’, you mean…”

“A common theory is that you tie your soul to the casting,” Severus said dryly. “I can’t say I would lend much credence to that, seeing as soul magic is a designation of it’s own. But the caster must commit to the spell in a way entirely extrinsic to, oh, levitation.”

“...isn’t that just intent?”

“They’re related.” Severus frowned, craning his neck to crack his spine while he collected his thoughts. “The Patronus charm—as I understand it, that requires you to commit a sense of happiness, or the spell will fail.”

“The patronus is dark?”

“No, you dullard. But it’s in the grey area. If it were dark, it would... well, I don’t know the spell construction well enough to say. It would probably eventually make it so you couldn’t truly find the sort of happiness you’d need to cast it, outside of the spell itself. Or maybe you’d become detached from the concept of happiness… Or dependent on the spell to feel it…”

“...what?”

Severus sighed, waving his hands around vaguely. “Dark arts have a bad reputation because they let you push past the limitations of being human. I’d thought that legilimency was just a powerful sort of charm, not unlike the patronus, but if you’re reacting to it then I can only imagine that you’re essentially... well, your magic is expanding to allow for you to become more than just yourself.”

“I’m... becoming... what?”

Severus shrugged. His nonchalance was rather alarming, considering that he was explaining how their using legilimency was apparently literally dehumanizing them. “Most people only have one mind. When you’re using legilimency, you’re probably opening up your mind to encompass the subject’s—my mind, and existing as both of us at once.”

“You think you’re making sense,” Harry observed. “But I haven’t got a clue what you’re saying. I’m becoming you?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “No. Well, probably not. Your mind is just opening up to allow for two where there was only one behind. It might even become instinctive after a while, no spell needed—I haven’t tried the spell myself. Someone’s probably worked out the theory. Whoever invented it surely did. I’d ask Lucius if he’s a book on it in that library of theirs—”

“No!”

“—but I’m not going to give the Malfoy’s extra blackmail over me just so you can test your occlumency.” He paused, then, frowning. “I’m surprised that occlumency isn’t itself dark. You say you’ve been taught...”
“Occlumency isn’t a spell, though,” Harry pointed out. “It’s not even got magic. It’s just reorganizing you mind.”

“It’s magic—”

“I can sense magic, Sev. It’s not. It’s got all the theoretical bits in place, but it’s just theory, because it’s all in your head.”

Severus frowned, but shrugged. “I haven’t tried legilimency, so I can not properly form my hypothesis. Once I’ve attempted, perhaps… should I try it now?”

Sick and cold as he was still feeling even with the blanketing warmth from the chocolate, the prospect of having Severus climbing through his mind was even more unappealing than it had ever been in the nineties. “Tomorrow,” said Harry, hoping it came across with some finality. “We’re both tired. And…” He glanced towards the fireplace.

“Tomorrow is Christmas,” said Severus stiffly. Harry, tired as he was, couldn’t hold back the giggle at the thought that Snape was protesting working over Christmas. He’d celebrated the solstice, after all. Conveniently for Severus, his latest glare had not quite faded, so he didn’t even have to make an effort to express how unimpressed with Harry he was. “Christmas, Harrigan. Day of both brunch and dinner with the Professors. Who would be very keen on finding out why two students with known connections to the Death Eaters are suffering dark magic overexposure. Do keep up.”

That killed Harry’s amusement. Dumbledore had been irritable enough the year before when Harry stepped in to help Severus against James and Sirius… Wait a moment…

“Hang on—Dumbledore! Dumbledore’s a legilimens. It can’t be dark if Dumbledore uses it.”

“Well, you can’t expect someone to defeat a Dark Lord like Grindelwald without getting their hands wet, can you?” Severus replied, though he sounded less than certain. “And besides, legilimency is in the category of ‘mostly legal’ dark arts, so there’s no reason he shouldn’t have learned it at some point.”

“And what determines what is and isn’t legal?”

“Politics and galleons,” Severus said blandly. “Which means this had better stay between the two of us financially deprived, unless you fancy putting your wandless patronus to the test in Azkaban.”

“Right,” said Harry, not at all comforted by that answer. The nausea was getting worse again, but maybe if he went down to the kitchens Hani would feel bad enough to find him some ginger to chew on. He stood up. “Sunday, then?”

“Sunday,” Severus agreed. “It’ll probably be easier for you to occlude against me by then, in any case.”

Harry held back a sigh at the nearly arrogant sounding confidence Severus spoke with. He didn’t want to know what Severus had done that he was looking forward to attempting the magic that was dark enough to make Harry physically sick. “Alright. I’ll see you…”

“At dinner, if your elf isn’t going to swap tomatoes for nightshade in my meal.”

“She’s not my elf, and she’d not going to kill you,” Harry muttered, and turned to leave. Only, the wards were still up, so he had to wait for Severus to cancel them, not fancying sicking up again from walking through.
“And Harrigan?” Severus added when he was done, voice soft. He paused, waiting, and Harry turned back, finding Severus’s face as cold as it had ever been in the nineties. “If you ever mention to anyone what you’ve seen today, the Dark Lord will be the least of your worries.”

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1 I believe when I first wrote this I had just read http://archiveofourown.org/series/55402 , and apparently accepted pieces of it as canon. If you haven’t read it before, I can’t recommend it enough for an examination of Snape as a kid.

[ return to text ]
Mr. Harrigan,

You seem to have misunderstood the invitation. I shall expend the remainder of my patience to rectify this: Your presence is not optional, and our arrangement neither suggestion nor request. There are apparently several matters which you need to be educated about and corrected on, and no pain will be spared in addressing those concerns should you fail to prove yourself anything less than a worthy student.

Until Friday,

V

Harry craned his neck, cracking it in two places, and Severus scowled.

It was Sunday. Christmas, the day before, had been a quiet affair and an overall relief from the projects the pair had taken on. Both welcomed a day's space, and Harry had even sat with Floyd and Kirke at the Christmas meals, their lighthearted ribbing a welcome refuge from Severus's sharp tongue. Professor Notaro announced his OWL waiver had been accepted over brunch, leading to an embarrassing applause from those gathered, even Dumbledore, who Harry hadn't spoken with since the beginning of the term. It came with a stack of homework he had to complete to catch up to his yearmates, but Harry didn't mind so much; he enjoyed Runes, and at NEWT-level they started in on spell crafting. And he had gone out flying after brunch, breathless with joy despite the frigid air because he was flying, actually flying, not studying or brewing or trying to solve time travel but flying. If only the 70s’ Cleansweeps could have gone a bit faster, he might have forgotten anything was less than perfect.

Then Sunday came, and it was back to work. Harry was not exactly excited about having his mind pried into, never mind he had already given Severus the same treatment, and he’d drug his feet all morning and dawdled over breakfast. But once they started, it quickly became apparent he needn’t have, and he became concerned for a different reason: they'd been in the classroom for an hour now, and the furthest Severus had gotten in legilimizing Harry had been to make him sneeze. Whatever had given him the advantage in occluding against Harry on his first try was clearly not helping Severus at all with legimency.

"I don't understand," Severus ground out, turning his stony-eyed glare down on his wand, as though it was defective. "What the fuck am I doing wrong?"

Harry shrugged. "I mean, it was intent holding me back. Aren’t you interested in getting in my
"Anyone would be terrified to look inside your mind, Harrigan. Your idiocy may be contagious."

"Temper, temper," Harry muttered, but he frowned, too.

As much as he would rather no one rooted around in his brain ever again, Voldemort was trying to get them face-to-face again, and the thought of leaving himself vulnerable to the Dark Lord was, frankly, terrifying. What had he done differently, that had made it so easy?

“Oh!” he said, slapping his forehead. “I remember. I thought—well, it’s just like occluding someone else’s mind, isn’t it?”

“…what?”

“You know, since occlumency is all about getting your mind in order, and all. Making sense of things… why are you looking at me like that?”

“That’s not what occlumency is!” Severus argued. “It’s about having control over your thoughts, so whoever’s crazy enough to try and get into your mind can’t take hold of it.”

Harry tilted his head. That sounded more like trying to resist the imperius than occlumency to him, but Snape had told him they were similar, when he’d first started the ‘lessons’, and they’d both read the same book, hadn’t they? “Okay, then what do you think legilimency is?”

“Reading someone’s mind,” Severus said without a hesitation.

Harry tried. Really, he did. But he lasted mere seconds before he started laughing, and once he started, he couldn’t stop.

“…what’s wrong with you?”

“Only Muggles talk of ‘mind-reading’,” Harry quoted, when he could manage it. “Thoughts are not written on skulls—heh—complex and multilayered…”

“What are you muttering about?”

Finally Harry managed to compose himself. He lost it again the moment he looked up at Severus, who looked baffled at Harry’s outburst. Eventually Harry took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and shoved the memory of Professor Snape lecturing him in his first occlumency lesson aside.

“The Professor… the one who tried to teach me occlumency? I didn’t understand legilimency when we started. I called it mind reading, too—it’s not. He seemed to find the suggestion insulting.”

Was it a good idea, to tell Severus stories about himself? Probably not, but he was also asking Severus to look into his mind. Good ideas weren’t his forte.

“Well, what is it, then?” the boy demanded. “I could feel you listening in on my thoughts, and digging up those memories.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s hard to say, really. There was—a lot.” He twisted his hands about in thought. “Remember when I told you about what it’s like to sense magic? How it’s… it’s everything all at once, and I can’t keep it out?”

Severus’s eyes flicked down to his wrist, where the beads carved with the null ward sat and protected Harry. “Yes.”
“And the spell you did—you saw all that extra magic around—”

“Yes, Harrigan, I understand. Legilimency!”

Harry forced a polite smile onto his face, in the false calmness of occlumency. Maybe that was how Regulus was so pleasant all the time—not that Harry would ask, lest his own pursuit got back to Voldemort…

“When I used the spell on you, first there was… surface thoughts. Everything you were, um, sensing, and feeling—you were confused the first time, confident the second. I couldn’t tell what you were thinking, exactly, not like words, but there were all these—these sparks. That’s how I got deeper into your mind: I followed the sparks. Like a, um… train of thought? And then I ended up in your memories, and those were easier to understand—have you ever used a pensieve?”

It wasn’t until after he asked that Harry remembered the incident with Snape’s pensieve. Even occlumency was barely enough to keep him from flinching.

“Have you?”

“Yes, twice, but… I didn’t know what I was doing.” He shrugged, as though hoping he could push his embarrassment off his shoulders. The first time, at least, it seemed like Dumbledore had wanted him to find the pensieve and see Karkaroff’s trial. Otherwise he would have properly locked the door—or was Harry trying to push away that guilt, too? “Neither held my memories,” he clarified, when Severus looked confused. “And my big nose got me into them. My point was, wizards can review memories with pensieves. Legilimency is like that, only you become the person in the memories, you don’t watch… They’re not as confusing as present thoughts, though, so when I got deeper into your memories, it was easier.”

“You did seem to slow down,” Severus said, tapping his wand against his lip. “It was kind of a blur at first, like you were just racing through everything. But then you seemed to stop.”

“Did you see the hallway?”

“You mean the stairs from the memory? Yes, I—”

“No, before that. The hallway of paintings.”

Severus’s blank look was answer enough, and Harry smiled. “Like I said, occlumency in someone else’s mind. Yours didn’t make any sense to me, because there was too much to process, so I slowed it down and organized it.”

“You… organized my mind.”

“I enforced an visualization, where it was a hallway and all your memories were paintings.”

“You—you—is that even possible?”

“Apparently,” Harry said. “I mean, after all, I did it.”

“And is that how you occlude your own mind?”

“Not exactly. Mine’s… concentric circles, and television sets, if I need them. It’s not as literal, since it’s mine. It already makes sense to me.”

“Will I be able to see that?”
“No clue. If you didn’t see the hallway, maybe it’s a personal thing.”

“You’ve been legilimized before,” Severus said. ‘By someone who knew what they were doing’ went unspoken.

“Yes.”

“Was that what it’s supposed to feel like?”

Harry paused, considering. “I dunno,” he answered honestly, and waited while Severus groaned. “No, really: I don’t know. The more I’ve thought about it…”

But he cut himself off. This was Snape, after all, and no matter how hard he tried to separate them he never really could. Harry was tempting fate enough trying to teach Severus legilimency. But there had been something fishy about the occlumency lessons—why had Snape not given Harry the book? And the visions of the Department of Mysteries—Merlin, it had been so long since he’d thought about those, though he’d been practically obsessed—in one of the lessons Snape found a memory that went farther down that long hall than any of his dreams had. And he hadn’t been able to occlude at all, only to occasionally fight back, when the book it made it all seem so straightforward…

“Hang on,” he said, thoughts coming together around one of his memories. “There is something we could try.”

“What?”

“Once, I was… when I was trying to occlude, badly, I ended up turning the spell around,” Harry said, drawing out his own wand. “It’s… maybe we can make it a two-way street. I get into your head, you follow the spell back into mine.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Severus muttered, eyeing him.

“Last time we did this I ended up puking, but you still agreed to try,” Harry pointed out. “And I wouldn’t have to go into your memories. Well, maybe a bit… dunno if I could occlude your surface thoughts the same way…”

“And how am I supposed to get into your mind while fighting you out of my own?”

“Occlumency would be my first bet—bury anything you don’t want me to see so deep I can’t get to it. I mean… you have the book now. There’s all the meditation exercises in there, have you tried—” He cut himself off at Severus’s unimpressed glare. It was a lost cause; Severus wasn’t the type to waste time with something like meditation. “Or you could always try… er…”

“What?”

“Trust,” Harry said. “Maybe I haven’t earned it, but I’m not going to try and dig up things you’d rather not have me see, you know. I just want to—”

“Fine.”

“—try to—what?”

“I said ‘fine’,” Severus repeated. “You try it on my again, I try to… follow it back to you.”

Harry shut his mouth, knowing he was gaping. Severus was really choosing trust? It made things easier, sure, but… Harry’s trust in Severus was something of a given; he knew Snape would be part
of the Order of the Phoenix eventually, and he could only hope there was some prerequisite decency back here in his teenage years. And they had developed something of a working relationship—but trusting each other to do their share of classwork and ensure the other’s magical experiments didn’t blow up was a bit different than trusting access to a mind… wasn’t it? Harry would never let Severus go into his mind unguarded, not even trying to fight back…

Harry swallowed. “Alright,” he said, trying to sound unmoved. “Maybe I can… I’ll see if I can pull you back to me, or something. Who knows. Are you ready now?”

“As much as one can be.”

Harry slowly raised his wand. He could do this. He’d done it before. Severus was inviting him in—“Legilimens.”

Whatever Harry had expected, diving into Severus’s mind after such a demonstration of trust, it wasn’t the burning irritation he found. This time everything in Severus’s mind was much clearer than it had been—if he tried, Harry might be able to make sense of the many-voiced words droning on in the background. He didn’t, though; it wasn’t what he’d come here for. He pushed through the surface level of Severus’s mind until he was drifting into memories, fragments scattered around him. This was as close to the surface as Harry had ever stopped, and it was more like what he remembered legilimency to be—flashes of things half remembered, images blurred and voices distorted, every now and then a particular scent; the Christmas tree in the Great Hall, Harry’s chalky face shaking with the touch of dark magic—

Harry steadied himself, and managed to take a deep breath without losing the connection. It was dizzying, but he focused, staring into Snape’s twitching black eyes and looking at the memories of other places and times at the same moment, but he managed to hold on to both senses. Could he have done it without the null ward? He was halfway certain he would have overloaded himself, but for now he managed to keep track of himself enough to open his mouth and—

*Try Casting Legilimens*

His voice echoed around him even as he spoke. Harry shuddered. He knew the words coming in were the ones he had spoken, but they echoed about in that half-identifiable way, with more words—sarcastic, biting words—trailing behind, which he strained for a moment to try and discern before they faded…

But something in Severus’s mind shifted, and then his magic gathered in the arm that moved up and he could feel Severus’s intent—”LEGILIMENS—”

And then, in Harry’s mind, there was a feeling like an itch. Slowly Harry pushed Severus’s swirling mind away from him and focused more and more on his own, on the way he could see the classroom still, despite the spell, on the itch of the ward around his wrist, on—

The ward. Merlin, the bloody ward!

Harry quickly called off his spell, and as it broke he felt the presence disappear from his mind. “I am an idiot,” he said as Severus lowered his wand, dropping his wand on the nearest desk and making to unwrap the string of beads from around his wrist.

“I got it,” Severus said, not really listening. “Didn’t I?”

“Sort of,” Harry replied. “I mean, you were definitely getting somewhere in there. But I—well.” He held up his arm, the null ward hanging from it in one long loop. “I’m guessing the ward has been
holding you back. It creates a barrier, so the magic of your spell was weakened. And I know you were using it properly, because, well, I was in there with you.”

“Well, take it off then, and we’ll go again.”

“That… might be a bad idea,” Harry admitted, looking down at it. “I mean, you’ve never… the magic sensing thing, I’m used to it, but if you suddenly go into my mind and have to deal with the full force of Hogwarts on top of the rest of my mind? I don’t know how that will mess with your head.”

Not to mention Harry wasn’t looking forward to taking it off. He’d grown comfortable wearing it over the last week, free from the headaches even the elves’ cleaning magic could trigger. He’d been amazed by how effective it had been at the Christmas meals, with Dumbledore and Slughorn both right there with their usually curious and prodding magic (and to his relief, despite his theory that ‘curious’ magic was the sign of a witch or wizard able to at least somewhat sense the world around them, neither had given any sign they noticed anything different about Harry). Harry also wasn’t sure he would be able to focus enough to help Severus figure out where he was going wrong, without it—but that was another matter entirely.

“How about you just, um, stick your wand arm through here as well? If we’re both in the ward, it should be able to hold us.”

Severus looked at him, unimpressed, and down at the beads, and brought up his wand hand, Harry offering them forward. But rather than stick his hand through, Severus swirled his wand in a forceful movement—“Engorgio!”

Harry yelped and very nearly dropped the string as it began to swell, each of the pea-sized beads growing until they were the size of snitches—then bludgers—and the larger disks to the size of frisbees—and the whole thing was so large it weighed down his arm and stooped his back as it pooled on the floor at his feet.

“Bloody hell, Sev,” he snapped when it stopped growing. “A little warning, maybe?”

Severus huffed and leaned down to grab the closest frisbee-sized bead. “Give me a hand, why don’t you. We can make this into a bigger circle and stand in it.”

“Next time you try something like that, tell me first,” Harry grumbled, even as he moved. “What if it had damaged it? You know how much work I put into this.”

“Yes, yes,” was the blithe response, and then Harry was distracted as Severus stepped into the circle and the ward reformed around him. It didn’t seem to be strained at all by the addition, so Harry was really worried—only magic passing through tested it, not what was contained inside or out.

A bit of rearranging and they were both standing the middle of the enlarged beads, the black mark on the floor from where Harry had activated them a week before in the center between them. “Alright,” said Harry. “Whenever you’re ready, then.”

“This is holding?” Severus asked, waving vaguely at the beads.

“Yeah, it’s fine. Not that it excuses you not asking, you ass.”

Severus rolled his eyes, but raised his wand again, frowning as he tried to recall what his near-success had felt like. Harry waited, re-adjusting to the feeling of another person’s magic unmuted, and when Severus called on the energy for the spell, he felt it and tried to welcome it, opening up the surface level thoughts on his mind as Severus intoned—“Legimens.”
The difference was immediately noticeable: as soon as the magic connected with Harry he could feel a foreign presence in his mind. At first, it was like a nagging thought, but it quickly grew—and with it, so did Harry’s senses: Harry wasn’t the one casting this time, so he was still aware of the rest of the classroom in his peripheral vision, and all the desks, and the beads with the magic coursing through—and then his emotions seemed to come in stronger, his eagerness for Severus to get the spell right, his fight against the instincts urging him to push the invasion out, the impatience of wanting an actual challenge to test his occlumency paired with the chiding voice telling him they were moving as quickly as they could and the fear the thought of putting any pressure on his barriers inspired—

The spell broke again. Severus frowned, lowering his wand, even as Harry grinned.

“That was it!” Harry said excitedly. “I mean, you were only at the surface level of my mind, but you definitely got the spell.”

“Yes,” said Severus vaguely.

Harry quickly lost his good cheer as he remembered what casting the spell had done to him on Friday. “Do you need to sit down?” he asked, cautiously. “If my reaction is worth judging by, maybe that’s all you should do for today. You know, to give your mind time to adjust…”

“I’m not about to have a dark magic backlash over something as small as this.” Despite the sharp words, his voice was lacking in its usual vitriol.

“Erm, alright.” Harry didn’t want to think about how Severus knew that. “Is it the magic, then? I know it was overwhelming for me, at first, when I was trying to figure out what was going on….” He trailed off, because Severus didn’t seem to be listening.

“When you look at me,” Severus said at last, glancing up but not seeming to see Harry’s face. “You see…”

Harry’s stomach clenched with dread. He could guess: when Harry saw Severus, his mind probably registered Severus with the memories he had of Professor Snape. He’d thought he had everything tucked safely behind the walls he’d constructed in his mind, but… If it was that obvious to Severus, what would it be like with Voldemort, who actually knew what he was doing? The version of Voldemort alive now didn’t look like the one from the graveyard, or the face on the back of Quirrell’s head, so if Voldemort came close enough to brush the surface level of Harry’s mind and saw those images, it would be suspicious. And Dudley Harrigan, a muggle-raised Ravenclaw of no repute, was definitely not supposed to have memories of the teenage Tom Riddle, either…

Maybe he would have to use the more drastic techniques, dangerous as they were.

“Let’s try it again,” Severus said suddenly, raising his wand.

“Hey!” said Harry, taking a step back, only to realize it put his foot outside the ward and quickly pull it back in. “Give me a minute…”

“A minute for what?” Severus said, suspicious.

“If you were getting any impressions, it means I wasn’t doing my job very well. What were you going to say I see? When I look at you?”

Severus let his wand fall. “It’s more what you don’t see. But if you’re occluding… you seem to have a much different idea of what occlumency is than I do.”
“Huh,” said Harry. As long as Severus hadn’t seen the connection to the future Professor Snape… Best to switch topics, then. “How about I try to show you the memory of what it was like for me to legilimize you? Maybe you can learn from how I approached it.”

“It’s worth a try, I suppose,” said Severus, though his eyes seemed to narrow a bit. Whatever his suspicion, he didn’t voice it. “Are you ready now?”

“Er,” said Harry. “Just a sec’.”

Quickly he shut his eyes and took several deep breaths, making sure there was nothing unusual going on in his mind. That was particularly difficult, since it was his mind, and his mind was, well, him, and trying to figure out if something was out of place was like trying to find a knarl in a prickle of hedgehogs, but he’d spent hours becoming familiar with his usual thought patterns. It was why the meditation was so important; in occlumency, introspection meant being able to fake regular thoughts all the more convincingly. It was like acting: the character he was playing was a version of himself missing the memories he wanted to hide, and the better he understood that role, the better his acting and occlumency would be.

Alright,” he said, opening his eyes again. He checked his grip on his wand, but kept it at his side, knowing that if he did slip up he could go for the method Snape had been trying to teach him, of using a spell to distract and break the attack.

Across from him, Severus raised his wand again, and his black eyes found Harry’s in a particularly piercing stare. “Legilimens.”

As before, Severus lingered at the front of Harry’s mind, and Harry stiffened as all those extraneous bits of information bombarded him—his nose wasn’t that itchy—but he tried to focus despite Severus’s clumsy attempts to guide his mind, and drew forward the memory of legilimizing Severus. It seemed to take ages for Severus to ‘grab’ the memory, but once he did, it shifted into focus, not just as a bunch of impressions and vague images but as clear as a pensieve memory, and then they were both chasing Severus’s train of thought, then forcing the visualization of the hallway, lined with endless paintings, the now-familiar faces, then—

The spell broke, and Severus staggered back into a desk and out of the circle, panting. Harry frowned as his sense of Severus’s magic dulled, the enlarged ward snapping shut as he exited. “You okay?” he asked, rubbing his aching head.

“That was my mind?”

Harry shrugged. “Well, my interpretation of it, I guess. Probably if you did the visualization exercises you’d come up with something different—”

“All those… those paintings, they were my memories.”

“Er, yes. I think. I’m not—”

“And you could just see them? All of them?”

Harry tilted his head, studying Severus’s face, with the widened dark eyes and—was he paler than usual? “Oh,” he said, trying not to project the unexpected regret he was feeling. “You didn’t—you didn’t realize what you were trusting me with.”

“I thought,” Severus started, but he cut himself off, and swallowed, and glared at his hands until they stopped shaking. “It seemed so… random.”
“I mean, I wasn’t going for anything specific,” Harry explained. “I don’t even know how I would. I know people can, but…”

“But you showed me that intentionally.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“It’s my mind. I… I had control of what I was thinking of. You’re the one who explained occlumency as control over your thoughts.”

“And how do I control it?”

“Probably when you—when someone is more advanced at legilimency, they’re the ones more in control, especially if you don’t know occlumency. It’s… a battle of minds.” Harry paused, watching Severus’s face as he thought, and for the first time since Lily had asked James out he truly, deeply wondered…

“Are you alright?” he asked, softly.

Severus’s eyes snapped up to his face, and he looked to be on the brink of snarling, but then he stopped. His nostrils flared as he took a deep breath in. When he did speak, his tone was neutral, flat, maybe a bit clipped, but nothing that fully betrayed the anxiety he seemed struggling to control. “I will admit I was underestimating the impact your request would have on my worldview. Perhaps I should have demanded a higher payment.”

Harry snorted, and let the rerouting slide. “Were you able to recognize my sense of magic, that time?” he wondered, as that was part of the price Severus had demanded of him.

“Yes. No. I—” Severus halted, and glanced down at his feet and at the ward, seeming to realize for the first time that he had left its boundaries. “There is something different in your head, like—like a new color. But maybe that’s just… minds.” He frowned, and Harry waited. “That felt more like your thought than mine, shit. But magic… I’m not sure.’

“I could show you. Pull up a memory with a lot of magic. I’ve got a lot of them, as you might imagine.” Harry smiled a bit grimly at the thought of showing Severus the horror that was first years, but let it slide. “Maybe not today, though.”

“Why not?”

“You’re looking rather—”

“I’m fine,” Severus snapped, straightening up and stepping back into the ward without hesitation, ignoring the way Harry winced as it morphed to accommodate him. “Are you ready?”

“Er,” said Harry. He didn’t like the way his mind was racing as he tried to find a balance of memories about magic he could draw on and still occlude. But, as Professor Snape had constantly seen fit to remind him, Voldemort wouldn’t wait for him to be ready. “Alright,” he said, and Severus brought up his wand, calling up magic for the spell with haste that betrayed his impatience.

“Legilimens!”

This time, when Severus’s presence pushed him into his mind, the surface thoughts seemed less present. For a moment Harry thought to focus on Severus’s own magic, and then felt the focus slip
out of his control and into Severus’s. It took a great force of will for Harry to draw his mind away again—and he could feel Severus protesting that, it was bizarre to feel someone else in his thoughts like that—but he he managed to call up the group of memories he had thought of, in a great chain—

...walking down the empty halls of the castle, the torches flaring to life one by one to light his path. You’re being ridiculous, he muttered to himself. They’re just bloody lights. But he couldn’t keep his attention to himself...

...

“But you can’t apparate inside of Hogwarts!”

“House elves is being able, Master Harry.”

“But—wards!” He waved his hand vaguely about, as though the wards were right there for him to gesture to, and Hani set down her basket. With a half-spin and a quiet ‘pop’—and a wave of magic that seemed to punch his gut as apparition always did—disapparated, only to return a moment later and find him dizzied by the magic, and reeling at the second wave. Her green eyes widened in alarm.

“Master Harry!”

“Right. House elves can apparate in Hogwarts. Who’da thunk?”

...

His finger slipped under the wax seal, breaking the spell and sending the tiny bit of magic racing back to where it had come from. If he had any luck at all, the Dark Bastard would still be attempting sleep, and the return of magic as he broke the seal would be a rude enough awakening. The letter, shaking in his hands to the point where it was nearly illegible, read:

Mr. Harrigan,

We have discussed previously the appropriate manner in which you are to address me, which you should—

Wrong letter! He had meant—Harry shoved the memory down and quickly called on another, pleased at his own response time and unexpected rush of control and hoping it would be enough to keep Severus from noticing as they plunged into—

Severus and Regulus stood before him, both wearing Severus’s face, and Regulus handed him a scrap of parchment. Which of us is which?

He crumpled it in his hands and returned to the spell circle analysis he was writing for runes (not even noticing as he switched ehwaz and mannaz; in his irritation, an error that Professor Notaro would find particularly amusing and tainted the memory with scholarly embarrassment) and ignored them, though he knew what Severus wanted. Yes, he could tell the difference between Severus and Regulus; Severus’s magic wound up tight as a twelve-handed clock and Regulus’s ever-flowing in gentle waves circling about his body. Yes, he could feel the polyjuice running through Regulus’s veins and filling a space in every cell, changing them to appear as something other than they were, but this was too much.

“Well?”

“I’m sorry. I have no interest in playing your games, if you are not going to follow the rules.”
Charms, a class not two weeks before the end of term. The students were set working on concealing and revealing charms, writing messages, hiding them, and trading them with their partners to break the spells. Harry was partnered with Martins who, despite her laziness, was a powerful caster with a knack for combining variations on charms to unexpected ends.

He was sweating, faced with her parchment, staring at it with his mouth halfway open and wand hovering uselessly in the air. She had struck again, using first a spell turning her ink invisible, second a spell redistributing the invisible ink, third a charm redirecting his thoughts, fourth a transfiguration into a page from their textbook, and fifth a simple glamor to make it appear like a blank sheet of parchment. And she had written with a quill charmed to make her handwriting legible, to top it all off.

He could feel every spell, and if his theory of his sensing was correct, his magic was tangled up in it, as though he were trying to untangle a knotted string by following it but kept switching between strands and not noticing until he’d lost the previous one. He’d faced much worse than this—Voldemort and the Hogwarts wards and first years—but here he was, trapped like a deer in headlights...

“Well, Mr. Harrigan?” Flitwick squeaked from in front of his desk. “Give it a go!”

He cleared his throat and, with all the longing to be free of this stupid trap he could muster, forced himself to wave his wand—“Finite Incantatem!”

Around the classroom, he could hear his classmates’ surprise as every parchment at once reverted to its original form. The conflicting waves of magic struck him all at once, and he went dizzy as his head began to throb, racing to try and interpret the overabundance of new stimuli, but he looked up to find Flitwick looking—strangely disappointed.

“Well, that’s one way,” the professor said.

As the students around the room started recasting their concealment charms, he felt like his head was going to explode, and started to his feet. “Migraine!” he practically shouted, running from his seat and out of the room, away from the chorus of bewildered laughter.

The study room blazed to life with lights, and he blinked, watching as Severus’s eyes widened with wonder. They were pretty, sure, but it was terribly unsatisfying, like—

“Well?”

He sighed. “It’s like... looking at the lyrics of a song.” Or the sheet music, he supposed, as he couldn’t read music at all.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This is a... logical visualization of magic, yes. If you want to try to place magic physically, I guess this would be a way to do so.”

“You don’t think this is, well, brilliant?”

Shrugging, he studied Severus’s incredulous expression. “I mean, sure. It’s probably really useful for healers, or, it would be, if they could focus the spell. But it’s not magic you’re looking at, its shiny
lights indicating where magic is."

“Hm... What’s going on with yours? Is it the spell?”

He blinked, and dug in his bag—he hadn’t thought of the potential to see his own magic. He hadn’t ever before, so it would be nice to confirm that he was at least somewhat normal, and transfigured a scrap of parchment into a mirror.

His magic was—he still held that the lights weren’t an accurate representation of it, but he saw enough of the way they wrapped tightly clinging to Severus to relate—his magic was curious like Dumbledore’s, curious and prodding, but spreading like Pandora’s, though not fine as a mist, but as thousands of tiny threads racing off into the world around him, and when he leaned closer, he could follow them to where several were wrapping around Severus, and forming dim trails between each of the brighter glowing lights—

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

“What?”

“I think that’s—I think I understand what’s—that’s my magic!”

“Harry?” Severus stepped forward, but paused when he looked at the magic—his magic—rippling with fascination. “What are you—”

“I understand!”

He reached out tentatively, wanting to touch the strands of light, but then he was his hand, the threads running through...

“Harry!”

Severus was looking fully alarmed now, even as Harry grinned. “I—my magic is how I’m sensing everything. See how it’s going, well, everywhere? It’s like—oh, I wonder if Dumbledore and Slughorn can sense magic, then. Not like this, but—their magic is always reaching out, curious—and that’s why I can’t sense my own magic; I can’t see my own eyes—it’s—”

“What the hell?”

They both started, turning to find Lily in the door, green eyes wide as she took in the room lit up with the sparkling lights, and—

The memory ended abruptly, and Harry fell forward, dazed but unsurprised. Severus’s response was practically identical to what it had been then, to pull back as soon as Lily came in. Harry looked up to Severus, looking forward to his astonishment—

“You got another letter?” Severus demanded, between pants.

“Really?” Harry grumbled, wiping his sweaty palms on his robes as the last remnants of the memory faded away. So his plan hadn’t worked. “That’s all you have to say? You’ve been nagging me for months about sensing magic, and that’s what you’re focused on?”

He didn’t mention that he was as well. This was why he was practicing. He’d been occluding as best he could, but he was so focused on keeping his past-future safe he’d let slip information that could be used against him. It scared him—Voldemort would have found more than that—but it was also a major inconvenience to his plan of not letting Severus know about the letter.
“You didn’t tell me.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake—did you sense the magic or not?”

“Yes,” Severus decided to answer, and Harry looked up at him, grasping the distraction. “I did. I wouldn’t have—you didn’t know, at first?”

“I’ve told you before; it was a result of the accident. I haven’t always been like this.”

Severus frowned, his eyes drifting off into space. “I can’t—” He stopped, and looked down at his wand, though it was like he wasn’t really seeing it. Harry knew the feeling, but unless looking into Harry’s mind was somehow opening his up to sensing magic as well (and Harry truly hoped it wasn’t, for Severus’s sake) the fact that Severus was looking only meant he was beginning to understand the difference between Harry’s perception and his.

“This,” Severus said haltingly, holding up his wand. “Do you this is… the Ollivanders speak of wands as though they could think.”

“They have their own magic, certainly,” he allowed, considering it. “And mine is different than yours—yours is from Ollivander’s, too?”

“Yes.”

Harry frowned, but couldn’t draw any conclusions, so he shrugged. He was getting tired. Maybe the result of having used legilimens earlier, seeing how badly it had affected him on Thursday. “Magic isn’t the same thing as minds,” he said carefully. “Or I wouldn’t have had any trouble with the spell at all. It’s more… well, you should know, having seen it through my mind.”

“I’m already forgetting. It’s… I can’t grasp it.” He finally focused again, looking up to study Harry’s face, as though he might find something there to recall it by. “Like forgetting a word, or the title of your favorite book…”

“I can show you more,” Harry offered, surprised to find himself pitying the other boy. He certainly wouldn’t mind having his sense of magic removed—that was what the null ward was for, after all, even if he’d modified it to let some magic through. “Maybe there’s a clearer memory I can find… the Great Hall? Or one of our practical lessons. Burke’s attempts at dueling lessons were a nightmare.”

Severus slowly nodded, and then set his jaw, raising his wand again. “Show me… show me what it was like to feel the Dark Lord.”

Harry grimaced and shook his head. “I don’t want to remember that at all. I could show you the Hogwarts wards, or—”

“It was the only time I’ve seen you lose control,” Severus said, with sharpness like hunger. “So much magic you went practically catatonic. I want to know what it feels like. That’ll be the higher price I should have already demanded.”

“I—”

“Show me.”

Harry winced.

“Or show me the letter. Why haven’t you shown it to me yet? When did you get it? What did it—”
“I’ll show you his magic,” Harry cut him off warily. “Once. Only once. And then you’re going to give me back my occlumency book, so I can read up on the spell put the memory permanently out of my mind. Maybe if I show you you’ll at least understand why.”

Severus’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded. He was getting what he wanted, after all, though it was doubtful he would truly let the letter go. There was a chance, Harry thought, that if he showed Severus how horrible it was for him to be around Voldemort he might understand why Harry absolutely could not go to the New Year’s Eve party. Then he could be trusted with the letter.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes, trusting he would feel Severus’s magic if he tried to cast legilimency on him before he was ready and would be able to push him out. Patiently he coaxed out the image he’d assembled to represent his mind, smooth walls of glass television screens that could not be climbed up, and turned every screen to blurring static. His nerves over approaching this memory again—the letter—his current situation—all of it he put away, and very, very carefully, he thought of Halloween, and Malfoy Manor, until he could pinpoint the moment just before Voldemort had arrived.

When he opened his eyes again, Severus must have found the dullness in them alarming, because his wand faltered on it’s way up. “Ready?” said Harry.

Severus almost looked like he was going to say no. Almost. For a moment. Then he got a grip on himself and raised the wand more firmly, and with a particularly determined flare of magic, jabbed it towards Harry. “Legimens!”

This… this was what Harry thought occlumency was supposed to be like, once. A complete detachment from self. He could feel Severus in his mind, even as he detached from his thoughts, letting them come and go as if they were the creation of someone else and he was merely the vessel that held them. He almost forgot what he was intended to do, in this space, except for the remaining prickles of dread from bringing up the memory. Severus wanted to know…

Ignoring the way Severus scrambled about trying to keep a grip on the connection, Harry imagined a large television—no, better: a projector to cast the memory over the smooth walls. He didn’t know what a projector looked like up close, though, because the ones they’d used in primary school had been for still images, so his imagination created something like a VCR base to a gramophone horn emitting a square of light, and in the light were shadows slowly crystallizing into the expanded foyer of Malfoy Manor, all filled with figures in their vaguely defined fineries drifting by.

Severus’s presence in his mind drew closer, drawn into the light, which expanded out—not a projection on the wall, but a hologram, then a full color experience of light and sound and magic and—

Severus steered him hastily through into the side hall, the tight grip bruising his arm, and pulled him to the side of the door. The magic diminished somewhat, but it was still all around him—the walls competing to let several rooms fill the same small space, and the people, there had to be hundreds, each one clamoring for his attention—

“For Merlin’s sake, Harrigan—are you a complete and utter idiot?”

Severus’s face was suddenly far closer than he’d expected. Maybe it had been that close and he hadn’t noticed, because they were like the walls bending to the illusion of distance, but without magic so close—“What?”

“You can’t just give people your life story like that. Not here. Not when your relatives were…”
Were muggles, who people like Lucius Malfoy wouldn’t see as human at all. “That’s what’s bothering you? Really. It’s not as though he didn’t already know everything I said, which is, frankly, rather disturbing, considering I have no connection to him at all—”

“You have me! No, the point was, you were…” Severus’s face curved into a grimace, his grip tightening, his magic rippling with apprehension, like it wanted to be the solution… “Waving it in his face. Like you were proud of it. Even knowing where we are—”

“I’m not ashamed of who I am, Sev. I’m not going to act—” He yanked his arm out of the vice-like grip. “—like I am, either. It would be pointless and stupid—”

“It would be tactful. Not that you have any tact. You’re being rude.”

“That’s the cauldron calling the kettle black.” The barrier the wall provided between him and the foyer had been overcome, and all the people there were one by one being pulled back into his awareness, even as his senses stretched out the other way, drawing more and more information from this new space. He stared at the skin under Severus’s left eye, to focus on that, instead. “You’re not exactly playing posh yourself.”

“I don’t need to. I am among contemporaries, who find my personality… permissibly entertaining, for whatever reason. You are among strangers you need to impress.”

“I don’t need to do anything. Why should I? Clearly these are the sorts who put blood before character.”

They were just words, tumbling out of his mouth, as plentiful and uncontrollable as the bodies competing for magical space in the foyer… Severus had a little scar, barely noticeable, a white mark against the ever present dark circle under his left eye, that changed as his gaze narrowed. “Oh, and suddenly you care about that.”

He’d found a library—he knew well what those felt like, like Hogwarts, like Oxford. There was something in there that had its hooks in his attention, that seemed to be pulling at him, and he tried to focus on his immediate surrounding but Severus’s hissing was grating against his ears and the people were loud and he shouldn’t be here—

“Maybe I do! Considering, as you put it, I have the sort of blood they wouldn’t want thrown in their faces, for fear the muggle might be catching—”

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, like he was the one with the growing headache. “Now, of all times…”

“And what about you, are you safe here? With your father—”

The black eyes flashed open again, piercing, voice low under his breath. “My father does not determine who I am. Pull yourself together, Harrigan. You agreed to listen to what was going to be said here, didn’t you?”

"I agreed to listen, but I don’t have to agree with it."

"Oh, so your politically neutral spiel... what was that then, a joke?"

"Neutral means I don't side with anyone."

"It also means you aren't trying to make enemies, unless you have a death wish, trying to face groups that stand together all on your own! And I'll have you know—"
The floor seemed to disappear out from under him, taking with it the crowds and the pressing charms on the walls and the library’s hooks and the sound of Severus’s voice—and close as that pallid face was physically it suddenly seemed very far away, while down across this long hallway there was something else, something that made his knees weak and heart heavy like a sudden clap of thunder had shaken him to his bones—like Dumbledore when he’d thrown Harry back with that force of magic that had blinded him like lightning—something that willed him to stare at that heavy wooden door—

Severus finally seemed to notice, but the door was already open, and he had stepped through, pale and tall, swathed in black cloth and a swiftly spreading magic—

“That’s him! Mordred’s hand, I thought…”

And then the magic overtook him, and everything began to fall apart.

The memory was so clear, it was like Voldemort was here, with them. And reliving the memory, experiencing all the fear of the moment combined with the anxieties he’d developed since… He was stuck halfway between the paralysis of overwhelming magic and the terror of hindsight—the horror of seeing Isis’s bloodstained feather—the understanding that Voldemort was trying to manipulate him and he was all but powerless to resist—and claustrophobia set in, the memory fragmenting along with the occlumency barriers, and all sorts of things came tumbling through before he could stop them: the TV screens toppling, finding reception as they fell—bits and pieces moving too fast to consciously comprehend save subliminally—

… Master, we crave to know… we beg you to tell us how you have achieved this… this miracle… how you managed to return to us…

—the flashed images and bursts of raw emotion hitting him harder and he spiralled even further out of control—

… You could be great, you know…

… the window and his glasses fogging with his breath as he read the letter in the dim light…

Old memories, new memories, colliding—speeding past him in twining fragments—

…Gulpin’ gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went… bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse…

…the hooded figure, sliding out of the shadows, bringing it’s darkness over the gleaming white and contorted form of the unicorn, bending down to drink it’s silvery blood…

…The Dark Lord and I have much in common. Both of us, for instance, had very disappointing fathers… very disappointing indeed. Both of us suffered the indignity, Harry, of being named for those fathers. And both of us had the pleasure, the very great pleasure, of killing our fathers to ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order! — You’re mad… You’re mad! — Mad, am I? We’ll see…

… the cauldron, bursting with diamond sparks into the dark... Let it have drowned, let it have gone wrong…

… You’re not — Not what?— Not the greatest sorcerer in the world. Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so…

…Whatever information you would give me, it could certainly end up shaping the world. But would
you risk it? Everything you know? Everyone you love? Perhaps you don’t yet realize, my boy, but our existence is as precarious as a knife balanced on a thread. The slightest slip, and...

No—no! Severus couldn’t see this, he couldn’t—he had to—had to focus—to—

...Get up! Get up! You are not trying, you are making no effort, you are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!...

...the square of vellum, shaking so much he could barely read it... Perhaps a proper quill will assist you in forming a less dangerous response?...

...Better save your own life and join me, or you’ll meet the same end as your parents... They died begging me for mercy — LIAR — How touching. I always value bravery... yes, boy, your parents were brave...

...Malfoy screamed and ran, Fang ahead of him, but he, he couldn’t move as the shadowy figure glided closer...

...Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves? — Hm, let's think... maybe Lord Voldemort?...

...Kill the spare — AVADA KEDAVRA!...

...please, let it be dead...

...And of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as... as... abnormal... and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you! — Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!...

...He was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it, but he wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort... he wasn't going to beg...

...Right, nineteen seventy five. That's... there's — There's a war brewing...

... Severus? Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell? — But Snape tried to kill me! — No, no, no... No, not that! Not—

...White steam billowing forth, filling the graveyard... It's gone wrong, it's drowned, please... please let it be dead...

...terrible, but great...

...Ah, what a story it is, Lucius. And it begins—and ends—with my young friend here—

“NO!”

Both boys staggered back as the connection broke, and Harry’s foot landed on one of the expanded beads, and he fell, tumbling backwards out of the ward, barely noticing the impact against the stone floor as he was deposited back into the full force of Hogwarts’ powerful magic running through the walls and the sense of the ward still covering Severus and the magic hiding them on the door and still the memory of Voldemort, overpowering as he was—

—if he screamed or cried out as he writhed against the stone, hands pressed against his ears and eyes
squeezed shut, he didn’t hear it, or anything, really, for all that the castle suddenly seemed so loud—
—a hand, sweaty and shaking and stinging with Severus’s bitter magic, pulled one of his away from
his ears, and he fought—

And then the ward was sliding into place back over him, the beads pressing cold against his wrist,
and the fight left him. The magic, overwhelming as it had been, was being pushed away, and there
was only the sound of two teenagers panting, and the classroom was really quite dim, no fire blazing
in the hearth to brighten it as the little light the windows and Scottish winter sky allowed faded into
night. Even Severus’s grip, intrusive as it was, vanished once the beads were secure, placing Harry’s
hand back down on the stone and pulling away.

Harry wasn’t sure how long it took to regain himself. His mind felt—fractured. The occlumency he’d
been so studiously practicing for months had abandoned him, leaving his thoughts to knock about
and topple into each other, disorganized as a jar of marbles fallen and broken open on the floor,
racing about out of control… But there was also a timelessness to it. After crashing through so many
years of memories, fragments colliding and overlapping and fighting for his attentions all at once,
being back in the single moment of reality was a blessed quiet, a stillness, an isolated space in time.

He managed to sit up, slowly, wincing when Severus cast a spell—but only at the stone beside
where Harry’s face had been. He’d been sick, or the sweat now chilling his skin had left enough of a
mark to warrant cleaning. His eyes found the spot where he had been, but it took nearly a minute for
his mind to process that there was only stone. The silence between them hung heavy.

“How’s never tried to kill you,” Severus said slowly, at last.

“No.”

“And there’s never been a Professor Quirrell. But there’s a Ravenclaw. A fifth year.”

Harry stayed silent, willing Severus to stop, to forget the fragments the way he forgot the magic.

“And that boy—he was a Malfoy, but you didn’t know Lucius—it wasn’t Lucius…” His expression
was frozen even as his black eyes traced the lines of Harry’s face, as though he would find some
answer there. He wouldn’t. Harry wouldn’t give it. He couldn’t. He—

“Who are you?” Severus finally breathed again. “No, I—When, when are you…?”

Slowly, Harry raised his wand. Severus knew—no one could know. Least of all someone who was
going to join Voldemort. He couldn’t have… seen it. Couldn’t know Harry was from the future, a
future tied to the Dark Lord… Harry knew the spell, and yet—

And yet.

His hand dropped again, and his wand clattered to the floor beside him. He couldn’t obliviate
Severus, not when he had never done the spell before, and might destroy the Slytherin’s mind. He
stared at the ground between them, not daring to look up, to look his failure in the eye.

What had he done?

“The Dark Lord. You call him by name. You think of him by name.”

This was wrong. No one was supposed to know. Severus wasn’t supposed to know! He had failed,
and now everything… everyone…
Maybe there was still a chance. He couldn’t take Severus’s memories, but he could… he could…

“He called you his young friend.”

Harry shuddered. He tried not to think of the graveyard, of Voldemort calling him by his first name, patronizing him in the mockery of a duel, Cedric’s spirit asking him to take his body back—“Severus, I can’t,” he pleaded, his whisper hoarse enough to be heard. “Please, forget it… forget everything.”

“Why?” Severus demanded. “Dumbledore knows! I saw! You and him, talking like old friends… If you’ve seen all that, why haven’t you chosen a side?”

“Because I will die!” Harry exclaimed, voice breaking as he shouted. “No, I’ll have never been born. If the future is changed…”

“Bollocks. You’ve been here long enough—”

“Don’t say it! Don’t—just don’t. You’re… you don’t know what it’s been like. What I’ve gone through. To try and protect… you can’t know. No one can know… oh, Merlin…”

“That’s what you’ve been researching,” Severus said. “All this time, you’d never tell me what you were looking into. You want to go back.”

“I have to. I have to. There is no other way.”

“Why not?”

“I won’t lose them!” He was shouting again, and he took a long breath, tried to still his shaking shoulders. “Everyone I care about, they’re all there. I won’t lose them. I won’t stay here. I can’t—”

But the words gave way to a moan, low and breaking and pathetic.

“Alright,” Severus said, his voice strained. “Then I’ll help—”

“The only way you can help me is to forget.” He managed to look up, his eyes getting as far as the top button of Severus’s robes. “There’s the spell, in the book… If I can’t—you’re not, not him. If I can’t… I have to seal away everything, I have to. He can’t… And you… you do too.”

“You’re going to seal away your memories?”

He sounded strangely repulsed, though Harry knew that in the future he would do the same, in a way, by taking them out of his mind before Harry’s lessons. If that future still existed. If—no—

“I have to,” Harry said. “If I run into—into him…”

“Oh, Jesus,” said Severus, and it sounded like he finally understood.

“If I can’t keep my mind my own, and he realizes… he…” Finally Harry managed to bring his eyes up the rest of the way. “I can’t risk what I know affecting what happens.”

“But you…” Severus started, only to cut himself off again. “Does he…”

He seemed to be struggling with his own words, and Harry’s gaze dropped again.

“Above all else, he cannot know,” Harry whispered. “I… I’ve got to hope I’m as small as I feel, in the grand scheme of things. That no matter what role I play until I… until I find my way back, it will
not affect the path. If he learns of what I know…”

“You have to learn occlumency,” Severus said quietly, but firmly.

“I need the book back. To learn the spell.”

“Are there others we can use?”

“...I haven’t looked.”

“If there are, we should find them. Find whatever method works…”

But Harry shook his head. “I need practice, as I told you,” he replied. “I… I was taught. He… the Professor… he did not seem to think I needed books as much as practice.”

“And you trust this ‘Professor’?” Severus said coolly.

Harry winced, knowing Severus would doubt that story, now. Now that he’d seen. Doubt could be Harry’s undoing. The irony of how skeptically Severus questioned his future self was lost on the moment. “Well enough,” he said. “But I still need the book back. If I’m really that, um, vulnerable, I shouldn’t put it off any longer. The spell.”

“Messing with memories is dangerous,” Severus protested. “The untrained obliviator could—”

“Why do you think I didn’t obliterate you, just now?” Harry cut him off, even as he shook his head. “This spell is different. It buries memories deeply, and seals them with magic, but they never leave your mind…”

“I’ve read the book! It said—”

“I know what it said!”

Harry ran his hands through his hair, if only to distract himself from the shaking, though he knew he was just spreading the cold sweat and the grime from the floor about. “I am way ahead of you, Severus. You think this is just some sort of—of complex situation, a puzzle to unfold. For me this is life and death, this is—this is everything. If this isn’t worth the risk, nothing is, and I might as well give up.”

“Give up?” Severus echoed.

Harry just shook his head, letting his hand fall to smoothen the fabric his robes, twisted about his knee. He wasn’t going to explain what was at stake in his attempts to maintain the future; even if he were to risk that, Severus showed no signs of understanding. “You want to know what the letter I didn’t show you was? He wants me to go to the Malfoy’s New Year’s Eve gathering. Offered me someone to explain the political situation in small words—”

“You said no.”

“Of course.”

Severus sighed. “I can’t… blame you, given the… But you don’t say no to the Dark Lord…”

“ You don’t,” Harry corrected. “I’m not in his service, and I’ve told him and you and everyone else a hundred times that I’m not ever going to be. He can threaten me all he likes, but I will not leave Hogwarts again until my mind is secure, and if that means burying my memories of the future, then that’s what I’m gonna do.”
Severus was quiet. “Then we have until summer. We can work on your occlumency, and you won’t have to—”

“No. I’m doing the spell as soon as possible. I’m not risking anything, with New Years.”

“You told him no—”

“He didn’t take it well.”

“Did he…?”

“Another letter. ‘Your presence is not optional’, and all.”

“Shit. But you’re not—he wouldn’t come to Hogwarts for you.”

The question at the end of that sentence was obvious. Good—maybe Severus was beginning to realize his estimations of the world were not so accurate as he had always assumed.

“Honestly? I have no idea. I can’t exactly imagine it, but I’m not some sort of Dark Lord interpreter. Could he get to me at Hogwarts? Undoubtedly, especially with Dumbledore as absent as he has been recently—”

“He has?”

“He’s been missing meals, and… he has a sort of unique magic about him. It’s pretty noticeable when he’s gone.” He frowned, for once not because Severus wouldn’t understand him, but because he could, now that Harry had showed him magic—but Harry didn’t have the words to describe what made Dumbledore’s unique magic. So he returned to Voldemort. “The real question is, would he? Would he come here? I don’t think I’m worth the risk to him, but he risked contacting me at all, knowing I could go to Dumbledore and he could use the letters to track him down. He put effort into having people look into me, whether he’s actually doing it to test whoever he’s got here or not. And we’re still not sure what he wants with me.”

“I thought we’d established it was to make you into another spy.”

Harry shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense. For him to personally extend this effort, for information other students give him willingly? He undoubtedly has more important things to do with his time than get some unknown Ravenclaw to spy on other Ravenclaws. Especially since you’ve pointed out a hundred times that I’m not exactly observant. It’s not like there aren’t—”

But he cut himself off. He had no clue where Barty Crouch Jr stood at the moment, nor if Severus knew. Crouch was Regulus’s friend, sure, but Regulus wasn’t even marked yet.

“What else could he want with you?” Severus said skeptically. “You don’t have money or connections, and if he needed runes work done, he’d hire a professional…”

“Runes work…?”

“You are Notaro’s prodigy protege,” Severus said offhand, ignoring the way Harry scoffed. “But you’re still a student. No one out there would have a student do serious work, except an apprentice closely monitored, which you are not. Otherwise… the only remarkable things are the ones you’re trying to keep hidden.”

That hung between them for a minute, and Harry found himself fidgeting with the ward around his wrist, adjusting it to sit more properly. It was lucky for him Severus had maintained the presence of
mind to get it on him, after the onslaught of memories; facing the castle’s magic again had been horrible.

But that was Severus’s gift and weakness, in a nutshell: quick to judgement over situations, people, politics… and the Severus Harry sat with now wasn’t the spy yes, and Harry had never known how that switch had happened. Everything he had seen since he had landed himself in the seventies had suggested Severus harbored no doubts in Voldemort’s cause—even with his history of friendship with Lily, a muggleborn, and his own muggle father. Harry might’ve trusted him, but he wasn’t an idiot. While Severus and Regulus acted like his proclaimed neutrality was a tolerable oddity, both of them seemed firmly convinced he would side with Voldemort sooner or later, and had made overtures encouraging him along. Severus had even helped with the letters—but how far would he be willing to go for Harry, if it meant going against the idol he made of the Dark Lord? He had already gone further than Harry would have ever expected, given the strange nature of their acquaintance.

“Have you mentioned the… magic sensing thing, to anyone?” he finally asked.

Severus’s eyes narrowed. “I gave my word.”

“Not even Regulus? Or…” He struggled to remember which of the Slytherins he’d seen Severus spend time with. There weren’t many. “Rosier? Or those kids you tutor… the Carrows?”

“I gave my word,” Severus repeated, just as flatly as before. “Who knows about the… you… time travel? Is that what it is?”

“Don’t say it,” Harry pleaded. “The less it is in your memories, the less I’ll need to hide.”

“Your unique circumstances, then.”

He wasn’t voicing the questions he undoubtedly wanted to, which was a good sign, Harry hoped. Hadn’t repeated asking ‘when’, or wondered why Harry thought he’d attempted to kill him in the future, or the shape of that future. But the sooner he could use the spell—on both of them—the better. “You’re the third.”

“Dumbledore.”

“Yes.”

“And…?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s better you don’t know. Once I use the spell—”

“You’re not using it on me!”

“Yes, I am,” Harry said, and he lifted his head to look Severus in the eye again, finding the Slytherin extra pallid. “I’ll do it after I use it on myself, if that comforts you at all.”

“No, it doesn’t!”

“Do you trust me?”

“I’m not letting—What?”

“You chose to trust me earlier. To let me into your mind unguarded.”

“That—It would have been impractical not to! We don’t have the luxury of weeks for me to learn
occlumency, and you’ve already been in my mind—I haven’t forgot—”

“You said you trusted me, before,” Harry repeated, impatience growing. “When I’ve lied to you, it’s been with good reason, and you knowing puts me in danger. Do you trust me enough that when I say I can’t explain now, you can accept I might know more about the situation than I do?”

“That’s not trust—and you’re talking about making me the second ever test of your proficiency with mind magic! That’s not trust, that’s common—”

“I could just obliviate you,” Harry offered. Watching Severus stiffen, he had to admit that probably wasn’t the best tactic for gaining anyone’s trust, but it was the truth: he could use a spell that kept the memories in Severus’s head, or erase them entirely. He sighed. “Look, I trust you, for various reasons, but you have to understand I am in an incredibly difficult situation. I’ve had a year and a half to learn how to deal with it, and I’ve not got the space in my mind to juggle worrying about you knowing, too, and you’re the one who wants to be in his company. If you can’t keep me out, how do you expect to occlude against him? Better to seal the memory away, where no one else can get to it, and where you won’t risk accidentally doing something you wouldn’t have if you hadn’t ever known.”

“At least let me try to learn occlumency first!”

Harry shook his head. “I’m… I’ll make you a bargain. If you can learn occlumency well enough to keep me out before I use the spell on myself, I won’t spell yours right away. In the meantime, I need the book back, to prepare properly.”

“How am I supposed to learn if you’ve got the book?”

“You’ve read it already, haven’t you? And like I said, I haven’t looked in the library for any other books. Maybe there are some there.”

Severus didn’t look particularly gratified by that explanation.

“Look, you can give it to me after dinner, if you need time to copy something down,” Harry allowed. “It’s only, er… flagratempus—it’s two already? No wonder I’m… how? When?”

“Two? What was that spell?”

“What? Oh, flagratempus. It’s from—well, someone wanted a time keeping spell, so based on flagrate, modified by tempus… Anyways, I… I need some lunch. And… I have to write another letter.”

“Another?”

“I really can’t go to your party, sorry.’ With prettier, more, um, self-deprecating words,” Harry said. Severus gaped at him for a moment, then shut his mouth and clambered to his feet. “For once, I absolutely do not want to see what you write.”

Harry shrugged and grabbed the closest desk, using it to pull himself up. He felt strangely weak, as though they had been fighting physically, not just mentally, but maybe it was the result of being hit by such overwhelming magic. It wasn’t unusual for him to feel sick when he was overwhelmed, after all, and they had been in the room since nine in the morning.

“Bring the book to the kitchens around dinner time?”
“You’re not going to stop trying to improve your occlumency, are you?” Severus asked. “If I give you the book, you’re not going to just look to that spell as your only defense?”

“Of course not,” Harry assured him in surprise. “If nothing else, I need to be sure no one looking in my mind can figure out there is anything missing. I don’t fancy getting my mind literally torn apart by some over enthusiastic legilimens trying to force their way past it.”

“Just checking… we’ll work on this again tomorrow, then. Same time.”

“Yes, that’d be for the best. Are you going to bring the book or am I going to have to break into the Slytherin common room for it?”

“I’ll bring it.” Severus lifted his wand to remove his wards from the door, but paused to fix Harry with a final narrow look. “But I think you need to reconsider.”


Sir,

I’m afraid I cannot be swayed. As I explained, I have previous commitments, and when I make commitments I keep them. I apologize if this is in some way inconvenient to you, but I can’t imagine any real effort has been made for the sake of someone like myself, so I can only hope the waste will be minimal.

Harrigan


Chapter End Notes

A pivotal moment! Which means Harry has to suffer for it. Sorry, Harry :)
Your name is Harry, he wrote at last, and then his hand froze in the face of all else he needed to convey.

This was it. The culmination of a week’s preparation, of waging mental warfare against Severus to be certain there were no gaps in his occlumency, of convincing himself that it was absolutely necessary to hide away the memories of every good thing in his life beyond where any invader could reach them, beyond where he could reach them—

Of uneasy silence; of nights spent tossing and turning wondering whether Severus was right, or if he should have obliviated Severus, or if there was any point to any of this; of days of headaches and nausea and little victories and fear that it would never be enough against Voldemort—

Of lying awake, unable to sleep, at the gut-wrenching thought he’d no longer have Hermione’s voice nagging him to occlude, Harry! It had been a year and a half since he’d seen them last, but he still expected to turn the corner and catch Ron running late to class, to spot Hermione with a stack of books taller than she was making her way around the library—

The *obfuscus* was going to end all that. He ought to be relieved, considering how it made something in his stomach clench whenever he turned to ask Ron a question and was faced with the weight of being alone here all over again. Considering that the spell would protect them, and all the future he was so desperately working to get back to. He ought to be relieved, but when it was just him and the wind howling outside Ravenclaw tower, the thought of losing them—

Because it would be losing them. The *obfuscus* wouldn’t completely remove the memories, but names, faces, dates, things that could be used to place Harry at Hogwarts in the early 1990s if someone happened upon the memories, those would all be gone. Hermione’s voice had to go, just like Professor Snape’s, because it was too recognizable. Even if it had remained, he was going to forget the rest of her…

Not forget: hide. The *obfuscus* didn’t try to snip out memories the way obliviation did. Instead it dropped a veil over them. If you tried to access an obliviated memory, it would be like a train running out of tracks; the *obfuscus* would be instead like running straight into a brick wall. Behind it, the memories would be safe, untouchable. And Harry’s future would be safe, too, no matter who tried to access it.

Well, that was the goal. He had to actually cast the spell first. That meant occluding everything he wished to remember while holding what he wanted to hide at the front of his mind. Harry was hiding most everything that had happened from the moment he turned eleven up until he found himself thrown back in time. Worse, he had to selectively allow for things like the content of classes, or he’d be as useless as a first year, unable to remember any of the spells he knew. But he couldn’t remember the teachers, because remembering Professor Snape would ruin everything—and remembering
Quirrel and ‘Moody’, who had both tried to kill him (and were, as it happened, both in Ravenclaw, both in the year below him, and both showing no signs of fanatical devotion to Voldemort at this stage) would rather defeat the purpose.

It was a daunting task. It was complex, and dangerous, and foolhardy, so ‘daunting’ was perfectly in line, but knowing that didn’t make it any easier.

The book seemed to agree with logic and Severus and Harry’s anxiety that this was a terrible idea. And when he finally moved past hating that he’d be forgetting Ron and Hermione each night, his mind moved on to circling through the what ifs: What if, as the book suggested, in hiding the memories he forgot who he was—who he could trust, how he was supposed to keep himself from destroying his future, the urgency that drove him to find his way home? What if he forgot entirely his reasons for standing against Voldemort, or his reasons for trying to stay away from the fight until he could get home? Or if he was so changed he—

His hand clenched on the quill, ignoring the ink blotching underneath the nib. No. He had to believe that he was the sort of person who would never stand with the Death Eaters and all their hatred. No matter what, he would always see the hypocrisy of their politics, and he would not stand for it. He didn’t need anyone to guide him in that sort of basic determination of right and wrong.

The potential of forgetting who he could trust and why he was studying time travel, however, was something he could not so easily dismiss. That was why he had sat down at the desk, surrounded by books and papers that he had deemed safe to keep outside of the box he’d already locked up tight in the bottom of his trunk, full of old notebooks and Weasley sweaters and other mementos from the future. That was why he’d found a quill and tried to write himself a letter, in case everything went wrong, and why he’d already spent an hour debating over three lists of names: Death Eaters, trust, and don’t trust.

The trust list, being the shortest, was the easiest. Hani he’d added without a moment’s thought, but once the ink was dry on the page he began to think of caveats. He trusted Hani, and loved her dearly, but she was above all else good. She cared for Harry, but she was technically Dumbledore’s employee, and anything he thought Dumbledore wouldn’t approve of he should really avoid involving her in. It wasn’t that she would give up Harry’s secrets—no, he was certain she would carry them to the grave. But he shouldn’t ask her to hold onto anything she would be conflicted about. He should’t even have let Severus ask her for chocolate after legilimency. She’d helped him and never asked for anything in return, and didn’t deserve the trouble he might cause for her. So he added a note:

*You can trust her with your life, but you shouldn’t ask her to carry it. She knows your secrets.*

After Hani, he added Severus, but he just as nearly scratched it out again. The note he added below Severus’s name was more involved:

*You may not like him, but you can trust his honor, and that one day he will save your life, and that Dumbledore will trust him with yours again. He knows your secrets, but you need to seal away his memories of discovering the latest, no matter what you have to do to convince him to allow it. No matter if he can’t be convinced. If you have any memories you shouldn’t left over, do not let him find out. He has the potential to change your future directly. Don’t let your guard down.*

Finally, he added Dumbledore. *Don’t believe him if he tries to get you to think it’s time to stop trying to find a way back. It’s not. It will never be. But he’s completely against Voldemort, so if you are in actual danger from him, Dumbledore can get you safe. But he might try to get you to give him information in exchange, and that would destroy the future, so don’t go to him unless you have to. And don’t let him find out about the magic sensing.*
He stared at the list for a while. Hani, Severus, and Dumbledore were the ones that knew his secrets—or knew that the secrets existed, at least, and he would rather not have anyone else find out at all. But after a few minutes’ thought, he re-inked his quill and added Hector and Pandora to the bottom of the list. They don’t know your secrets, and don’t tell them, but you can trust them beyond that.

And that was it. Granted, he’d spent a year and a half trying to stay under the radar, and if he’d succeeded, there would be zero names on the list. He was tempted to destroy the list, to up the chances that he stayed away from everyone—but, no; that was unrealistic.

The Death Eater list was easier, though he did end up leaving Pettigrew’s name off it. If there were any chance at all that word of Pettigrew’s betrayal got out before it happened, Harry’s chances at returning to the future would end in cataclysmic failure. He did include Pettigrew on a list of people whom he shouldn't trust, on which he also included the whole of the Ministry of Magic (remembering Remus's tales of the war, in which Voldemort had infiltrated it at almost every level), Lucius Malfoy, and, after much thought, a note of probably Regulus Black.

He nearly crossed that out too, but Harry had seen how quickly Regulus’s temper could turn for the worse. The coldness his words could have. How Regulus had no trouble manipulating Harry to get the outcome he wanted. It would be worse if Harry didn't put Regulus on the list and was used than if he was needlessly mistrustful.

But that left him with the letter. And more than an exercise in classifying people, writing the letter was like admitting that Severus and the book were right, that this was a terrible idea and that was likely to lose himself in the process. And while he could fight off the imperius, and he was getting better at occlumency, after how horribly vulnerable just being in Voldemort’s presence left him, the threat of losing himself was more real and terrifying than it had ever been. He’d never felt so entirely helpless as he had after that. Voldemort’s magic was—there was too much of it, and it was almost enticing, and—

And now he had the null ward. He set aside the quill for a moment to run his fingers along the beads. If he lost himself—he would find a way. He wasn’t an optimistic person by nature, but he’d spent a year and a half studying a seemingly impossible branch of magic, and next to that, this was nothing. Next to that—there was always a back door. He could undo the spell at any time. He was writing the letter as an… extra bit of security, that was all.

He picked up the quill again. Your name is Harry, he’d already written, and that seemed as good a place to start as any.

Your name is Harry, short for Dudley Harrigan, which isn’t your real name but the only one people know you by. It’s not safe to go by your real name and it isn’t safe to even know it, or to remember most anything about your life after you turned eleven. You must keep your memories sealed until you find your way home.

Home is March 31, 1996.

All my notes on time travel are in my desk drawer. I’ve got contacts at the OMRL Oxford Magical Research Library, who should let you back next summer if you keep up the translation work, and though it won’t be easy without the scholarship I had last year it will be worth the work. You must find your way back. There’s no point to any of this if you don’t figure out how to travel forward through time.

The most important thing is to try not to affect the present. If you do, it’ll mess up the future. That’s
what this spell is for. I’ve somehow caught Voldemort’s attention, and Severus saw my secrets while we were working on occlumency, but you have to keep trying. This spell will buy you time. You must pursue absolute neutrality. I don’t agree with Voldemort at all, and if it wouldn’t ruin everything, I’d fight him alongside Dumbledore in a heartbeat, but it’s not that simple. I have to go back.

Keep your head down in class. Try to stay away from the Slytherins and Gryffindors especially, and everyone on the list of people not to trust. You might not remember why you shouldn’t, but that’s for the best. If you can’t remember, no one can get the memory out of your mind.

Practice your occlumency. If anyone can find a way around this spell, it’ll be Voldemort. You’ve got to be able to occlude well enough that if you meet him again, he won’t even know there’s a spell to break through.

If worst comes to worst, call Hani. She’s a house elf and a good friend. If you explain what you’ve done, she’ll be smart enough to help you figure things out without exposing too much. Just tell her you can’t know specific names or stories about the future, but you need to know about yourself as you’ve been since you met her. She probably memorized my cover story when we were working on it last year, so she can help with that—There’s also a copy of one of the letters I sent Voldemort that gave an overview. Just don’t let Hani go to anyone else unless you’re absolutely sure you need it.

If you can’t remember the magic sensing, Severus should be able to fill you in, since he’s been attempting to research it. Just don’t ask him until after you seal his memory. Specifically, you must erase the memory of what he saw in your mind on Sunday, and anything and everything relating to time travel since then. You must not look at what he saw. If this spell is actually too dangerous to use on him, then you must obliviate him. He can’t know, because if he knows, then Voldemort is going to find out.

Destroy these pages once you’ve read them. I’m leaving the list of Death Eaters because I don’t want anyone to get the drop on you, but you aren’t supposed to know most of those just yet. I don’t know when they get marked, and I don’t know who is already, or if they all even support him at this point. Just try to stay out of their way, and don’t do anything that might prevent them from becoming Death Eaters. It sucks that it has to be this way but I can’t risk destroying the future I came from. I have to get back.

He paused, wondering what else he could write. Would it be enough to convince himself not to reverse the spell immediately, if something went wrong? Had he made the importance of studying time travel clear enough? Should he add—what? What was he missing? He had to be missing something. Many things. Too many—

There was no point in this, and he didn’t have the time, anyways. Tomorrow was New Year’s Eve, and that meant he had to do the spell now. He folded the letter, and cleared some more space on his desk, so it would be obviously in the middle. Then he fished out a fresh sheet of parchment, and wrote the words he had chosen as his password. He tried not to think about them too much—less to remove with the spell—and folded the paper, scratching out one of the strongest preservation spells he knew on the back. Those words would be the missing link that all the memories were tied around, the keystone, the connection that would close the circuit. It was vital that piece of paper was kept safe.

Once he cast the *obfuscus*, his magic would sink into the ink of the password. The book recommended having an assistant cast, but if one wasn’t available whatever object the password was written on could be folded up or closed, so long as he was touching it. So he rolled it into a scroll (the preservation charm disliked folding) and tied it off with a shoelace.
After he erased Severus’s memories, he planned to hide both their phrases together in a book in the library, which he would put stronger protections on. He might even ask Hani check in regularly to make sure it was still on the shelf, and to inform either him or Severus if it showed any signs of being tampered with. That way when he got back to the nineties the key to his memories would still be somewhere he could reach, and for now, if somehow Voldemort or anyone else *did* realize there were important memories missing from his mind, it would be secured at Hogwarts.

Ideally, he would tell someone else as well—Dumbledore. But somehow he didn’t think Dumbledore would approve of him doing potentially dangerous mind magic on himself, and so he’d have to explain why he was doing it, and he would risk Dumbledore realizing how much shit he had gotten himself into. He tabled that idea for now.

That meant Harry was out of preparations to distract himself with. There was only one thing left to do: begin the process of the spell itself.

Which was, frankly, more terrifying than facing a dragon. And Harry would know.

What if he messed up? What if he’d missed something in his letter—he went and reread it twice, and started to add on a note at the bottom, only to scribble it out again. He was over thinking and letting his panic get the best of him—but considering it was his mind at stake, panic was not unwarranted. There was so much that could go wrong! What if…

Eventually he calmed his breathing enough to start clearing his mind, and when he occluded some of the smaller thoughts, he was able to start chipping away at the fear. And it was productive: the first step to the spell was to occlude everything he wanted to keep in his mind, and bring forward what he wanted to hide. That was why it was better to perform the spell with another person: if you were only trying to hide away one thing, a legilimens could help bring it forward. The one who was having their memory sealed would only have to focus on occluding, and the legilimens would cast the spell, so they wouldn't risk breaking the focus that such powerful occlumency required.

Harry wasn’t a particularly powerful occlumens—if he were, Severus wouldn’t have seen any of the memories he had—but he was competent enough, and he didn’t have anything but his own mind distracting him. It was as simple as meditation: slowing down his mind until he could let the thoughts drift by and push them away.

He opened his eyes again when his mind was clear. It would be best to double check his preparations, now that he was able to focus again. The letter was on the desk—good. Had anything been left out of the box he’d locked up in his trunk that might trigger a memory?

After a long hesitation, Harry went to his nightstand and pulled out the pieces of parchment Hermione had left for him in the occlumency book. Then he took the book and opened it upside-down over his bed, fanning the pages so all her bits of advice fell out, and he gathered them up and locked them in the box. After another moment’s consideration, he found another bit of parchment and added a note reminding himself to use a notice-me-not on the box and hide the password in the library, then he picked up the book again.

Hermione would have thought this plan up ages ago, he thought glumly as he flipped through the pages, searching for the section on the *obfuscus* again. Her plans always had a knack for complicated and ruthless magic. But she also would have been working circles on the floor and new creases in her brow under the pressure of pulling it off, he thought, and he was rather comforted by that thought, because she was the best witch he’d ever known and he knew a fair few superb ones, so doing as she would was probably for the best.

He read through the description of the spell again. With the password parchment in hand, he would
clear his mind of everything except the memories he wished to erase. Then he would tap his wand to his head, incant the spell, and with any luck, all those memories would disappear.

On the bright side, if he got through this without completely destroying his mind, when he got back to the nineties he’d be able to take all of Professor Snape’s ‘clear your mind’ bullshit and shove it up his—

—On the other hand, it was more likely he’d get back to the nineties and Snape would kill Harry himself for trying something so stupid, and Harry, if he messed up, would have absolutely no clue why.

No. He couldn’t think like that. This was mind magic, and a thing like doubt would be that much more potent. He pushed it aside, and snapped the book shut, setting it aside on the desk. Then he picked up the folded parchment and drew out his wand and stepped into the middle of the room.

If anyone had walked in, they might have thought he was asleep on his feet, as still and absolutely relaxed as he stood there. He wasn’t paying attention to how much time it took—he couldn’t rush it; he’d be ready when he was ready and whether it was seconds or hours was the last thing on his mind. It was filled instead with far too many memories, many of them quite horrible, and names and faces and dates between July of nineteen eighty one and March of ninety six. All an organized chaos waiting to be forgotten.

Eventually, Harry stirred, his wand bearing hand slowly reaching up and touching the tip to his forehead. He would forget, too, the shape of the scar there, and the color of his fringe as it was supposed to be, and what his face looked like without freckles and with round instead of square glasses. He would forget it all, everything, and it was for the best.

Without opening his eyes, he took a deep breath. *Intent."

“*Obfuscus.“

With a deep gasp of breath, he became aware of himself. He stood in the center of an eight-sided stone-floored room lit against the night outside by faintly glowing glass orbs attached to the walls, each glimmering like the stars painted on the ceiling overhead and in the sky beyond the tall windows glimmered. In one hand, he held a rolled sheet of parchment. He could read it and find answers, but it was Eden’s apple, so he did not.

In his other hand, his holly wand thrummed her constant song. She was his, and he knew her, but he did not know her name.

He did know his name.

He set her with the scroll on one of the beds, the one where he slept. There was another, both owned and unused, a dichotomy that confused him as he turned to stare, half unseeing, at the blue covers and bronze hangings. Where was its owner? Had he been left behind? There were the echoes of a familiar magic there, but they were fading, and he felt an emptiness in his chest to match the absence he felt looking across the room…

He tore his eyes and thoughts away, and found his gaze sliding across the room, not quite settling on
anything it held. He was looking for something, though he could not remember what. He couldn’t remember many things, he thought, though he was not sure why he thought that, since he knew only what he could see and feel and sense, so what more could he imagine to remember? He felt keenly the absence of an Other from the empty bed, and was an Other then surely there were more, for he knew that through the window the night extended out beyond what he could see. So he furrowed his brow and searched his mind for a name for the Other, or for him, since he was certain he was supposed to have one.

None came. Perhaps it was written on the rolled sheet of parchment, but he would not open that.

At last he saw the desk, which he’d looked over twice before but only now noticed. It was covered in unruly stacks of books and papers. That was where he would find what he was looking for, surely, in the books. He stepped closer, until he could run his hands along the loose and uneven edges of the thickest book, rippling the pages with a quiet fluttering, but did not open it. Nor did he pick up the book that rested at the top of the stack, though he did brush his palms across the cover, and felt it ever so slightly warm to his touch. Instead he picked up a thin stack of parchment that sat at the very center of the desk, beside where a quill rested in a bottle of ink. Like the roll of parchment, it was closed, and he was certain it must hold the answers he was looking for.

But he hesitated. Was he supposed to read this one? He had known not to open the other, but while he was sure that this one would ground him with information, but just because he didn’t feel a repulsion from it didn’t mean he was supposed to read it, either…

He didn’t have an alternative, since he didn’t think it was likely he was supposed to just sit on his bed twiddling his thumbs wondering where the Other was. And he knew this was where he would find his answers, and there was nothing to suggest he shouldn’t read it. No repulsion, no note saying ‘don’t read’, or any of that. So instead of wasting more time debating the possibility of it, he unfolded the stack and let his eyes scan the familiar, inelegant writing.

*Your name is Harry.*

“Harry,” he said softly, and then he was quite still and silent for a time, because his voice seemed to break the trance he’d been caught in and from there his memories came cascading back down and—

Ten minutes passed before Harry staggered back to lean against Hector’s bed, and sitting there he shuddered, as though to shake off the last of the stupor. He was exhausted. He’d known the *obfuscus*, being mind magic, would be as tiring as legilimency, but after the tumble he’d just taken through an avalanche of memories he felt like he’d just been—

Well, it was his first impulse to say he felt like he’d been thrown off his broom by a bludger, but he couldn’t recall ever being hit by one to say whether that was true. Pandora sometimes filled in as a reserve player for the Ravenclaw team, but Harry never even went to the games—there were too many excited kids giving off too much excited magic for his comfort. Still, when he tried to recall why his first instinct would have been a quidditch metaphor, of all things, he came up with a very conspicuous lot of nothing and a twinge of pain behind his eyes.

That was going to get annoying fast.

What had happened? He’d cast the spell, and it had worked, if the vague notion he was forgetting something was enough to go by, but then he had—he had forgotten himself entirely, for a minute. Harry shuddered, and glanced over at the bed, where his wand and the password sat. No, he hadn’t been *entirely* gone, which was good, because if he had unrolled that parchment it would have been pointless. But for the most part…
It was as though once he’d dimmed all the information he’d been holding in exclusive focus his own occlumency had kept everything else out of his mind, too.

Eventually, he scanned the rest of the letter. He remembered writing it, but he couldn’t remember what it said, since he’d taken out the memory of writing his password and hadn’t been able to separate out the rest of the writing he’d prepared—strange that he could remember taking out the memory. Strange too, reading what he’d written—and relearning what he was supposed to already know, what he’d known just minutes before.

And how was he supposed to react to finding out he was a time traveller? He didn’t feel like a time traveller. He wasn’t sure how a time traveller was supposed to feel—but then again, it made all he had put into studying time travel make sense. He hadn’t gotten anywhere, of course, because he was seventeen and trying to invent a branch of magic, and the thought of that—

Was absolutely terrifying. Like most things were, this evening.

Was he really trying to invent a way to send himself forward in time? Planning to test potentially universe-altering magic on himself? Of course it would be better for him to go back—with any luck there would be no Dark Lord inviting him to New Year’s Eve gatherings in the future—but attempting that sort of magic on himself was just—just—

Well, probably about as stupid as using powerful mind-altering magic on himself, and he’d apparently done the *obfuscus* well enough. He felt the same, now that he’d forgotten… Well, he thought he felt the same. Mostly. Somewhat.

It was hard to tell.

Sighing, Harry turned to the next page in his stack, and soaked in the three lists he’d left with growing frustration. Many of them supposed Death Eaters he recognized from among his classmates—and, having seen them at the Halloween gathering or simply paid attention to their choice in company, he wasn’t altogether surprised—but there were some names he could only identify by familial connection, and a few—like Igor Karkaroff—that he’d never heard of at all. And he nearly laughed when he saw Barty Crouch Jr on the list. Barty? Son of the head of the DMLE? One of the four fifth-years who Hector tutored for exams, who Harry had once seen lead an argument with a seventh year until they were both arguing opposite sides from where they started? But Barty was also on the list of those not to trust, and he didn't have a 'probably' written there to qualify his inclusion the way Regulus did.

The ‘to trust’ list was no more useful, because he’d still write the exact same things about Hani and Severus as he had before he'd used the spell, except the bits relating to the secret. Dumbledore's inclusion did give him some trouble, though. Harry had only the vaguest memories of when they had first met, but he the headmaster had been very helpful—more than a stranger from the future deserved. Dumbledore had even gotten Harry to the OMRL. Harry didn't precisely like the man, not after he’d turned a blind eye to James' and Sirius's bullying, and he’d seemed, the last few times they had spoken, strangely pushing for Harry to give up his task, but…

Above all else, Harry knew Dumbledore was powerful. He could sense it every time the headmaster left the castle, for the sudden absence. With all that magic, his history of defeating Grindelwald, and his sometimes aloof, sometimes, ah, quirky personality, Dumbledore was a larger than life character—and maybe that was the problem: Dumbledore didn’t strike Harry as particularly concerned about the smaller problems in the world. If Harry went to Dumbledore for help—well the note said Dumbledore might demand information about the future. Everyone had a price, even Dumbledore, and Harry suspected his would be too high.
In the distance, the bells tolled to mark the hour, and Harry jumped. He counted the time—eight o’clock. Only eight? Exhausted as he was, and with the voids in his mind he was trying very hard not to think about, it felt much later.

“I guess it’s not too early to sleep,” he said to himself as the eighth toll faded.

He felt foolish for speaking aloud, but settled onto the bed anyways, and fell asleep, fully dressed, before his head even hit the pillow.

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Harry and Severus did not cross paths on New Year’s Eve.

In truth, Harry was avoiding all human company, so the absence of Severus was only noted by the parts of Harry’s mind which had formed a cult of thought which held above all else the apocalyptic belief that Harry would not survive the night free of Voldemort’s company. Severus was, without a doubt, fully aware of the specific dangers he faced by choosing to place himself in the presence of the Death Eaters, danger which Harry had only a vague (and therefore all the more terrifying) notion of. But the ink of Severus’s name was black on the list of Death Eaters he’d left himself. Even if Harry wanted to stop Severus from going, he knew he could not. It would risk the future, and that was unacceptable.

In any case, he had no place trying to stop Severus from making his own choices, terrible though they may be.

He had also listed Severus as someone he could trust, and even if realizing Severus now had witnessed things from his past that Harry had sealed away was extremely unsettling, he didn’t need any note to know Severus’s honor would be enough to ensure he would try to hide Harry’s secrets.

Still, in the devoted portion of Harry’s thoughts where he feared, he found a thread of worry for Severus, too. Harry’s mind, still working overtime trying to compensate for the obfuscus, was powerless to occlude against the anxiety filling his waking hours.

(He hadn’t realized how bloody literal the analogy about the obfuscus being like a solid wall would be. All he had to do was think about thinking about anything he couldn't quite remember, the seeds of a headache would plant themselves like red-hot lead in his brain.)

So too was he powerless against a new irritation, which was in fact what had woken him to face this nerve-wracking day to begin with. Though the null ward was visibly unaltered from when he’d activated it two weeks before, there were moments when its magic seemed to flicker like a dying lightbulb, and the web would begin to tear, and through that tear he would suddenly witness the magic of the world in perfect, overwhelming clarity, like he was standing frozen in the face of a tsunami. Just as suddenly the tear would seal shut, and it would be like he’d imagined the whole incident.

That, too, inspired the thoughts chanting in their cult of fear, for if all went wrong and he ended up unwillingly pulled into the presence of the Dark Lord that night, and if the ward failed, what hope did he have of protecting himself or the secrets and hints at secrets which he still carried? If Voldemort realized what he’d done, he’d know Harry had something to hide… And Harry knew, in a vague memory filled with faceless forms and voiceless words, that he had been able to resist the
imperius curse from the first time it had been cast on him, but if he faced the full terror of the Dark Lord’s magic, would he be able to hold his own? If Voldemort ordered him to deliver the password to him, could he resist?

The more he worried about it, the more painful his head ached. It did not ease his fears in the slightest.

Well, there was nothing he could do, save hope it was his stress that was the cause of the faults in the ward, that he was having flares of accidental magic overloading its capacity to keep magic both in and out. But before he went down to the kitchens for the day, he snuck into the library—Madame Pince nowhere to be seen—and took out a book on warding, filling the card out himself. Probably he wouldn’t have gotten away with it had the librarian been there, since he still hadn’t returned the two he’d taken out from the restricted section, but he was familiar enough with the library to file the card, and she’d be none the wiser. Probably.

The elves, despite the holiday, were as busy as ever in the kitchen, and Hani was upstairs with a group of them cleaning Gryffindor tower, at least according to the elf who brought Harry a hearty lunch. This elf had no qualms scolding Harry for not eating his breakfast, and hinting that he shouldn’t be reading at the table since it made him eat too slowly. Harry quickly gave up trying to be polite and held the book up pointedly in front of his face.

He wasn’t feeling particularly hungry, even after the previous night’s magic, probably because lunch seemed like a silly thing when he was actively disobeying the command of a powerful and violent control-freak of a Dark Lord. Between his appetite and the reading and his wandering thoughts, it took him the better part of an hour to get through the bowl of soup he’d been presented with. He hardly touched anything else, but eventually gave up on eating, moving to the stool they kept for him by the fire and focusing entirely on the book.

It was several hours before he was disturbed again. Hani had returned, and at the touch of her magic he’d looked up and given a bit of a wave, but she was levitating at least fifty red and gold mugs over to the sink, and didn’t seem to have time to say hello. He turned back to his reading.

It was all quite fascinating information; explanations on defensive warding that made far more sense than any of Professor Burke’s lectures in the scattered lessons they’d had on the subject. But as interesting as it was, he didn’t find any answers as to why his ward had been failing that morning.

It was as he was sighing in frustration and running his hand through his hair that another elf approached, crossing its arms over its chest and inspecting Harry critically.

“Hello,” Harry said cautiously. He didn’t think he knew this elf, but then again, he wasn’t entirely sure what all he had forgotten.

“Hello, Master Harry,” the elf said, bowing low without unfolding its arms. “I is being called Moggy.”

“Oh. Um, hi, Moggy. I’m Harry.” He shifted awkwardly in his seat, glancing over towards where the rest of the elves were starting on dinner. “Am I in the way here?”

“Oh, no, Master Harry,” Moggy assured him, straightening back up. “Moggy is just wishing to greet you directly. Moggy is being Master Spencer’s elf, sir. Master Gregory Spencer.”

“The librarian at the OMRL?” Harry asked in surprise.

“The very same,” the elf said, puffing up his chest slightly.
“Oh,” said Harry, suddenly worried. “He hasn’t—I mean, he—”

“Master Spencer is moving to the Americas, for a few years,” Moggy explained kindly, soothing Harry’s fears. “He is being asked to help organize the Magical Library of Congress, since they is not knowing how as well as the wizards here. But there they is having strange laws about house elves, and Master Spencer is having to leave Moggy behind.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, watching as Moggy’s ears drooped. “I’m sure he will be missing your help very much.”

“Very much indeed,” Moggy agreed.

“Would you like to sit down?” Harry offered. He knew that most of the elves found his either highly generous and terribly insulting, but Moggy seemed a calmer sort of elf.

“Oh no thank you, thank you very much indeed, Master Harry,” Moggy said, going rigid with delight. “Moggy has heard of Master Harry’s generosity among elves, sir, even back at Oxford, but Moggy is being very happy standing, yes, very happy indeed.”

“At the library?”

Moggy nodded. “Master Harry is bringing Hani with him when he comes, and Hani is knowing all the Oxford elves, from—” He cut himself off and leaned closer, glancing nervously over to where Hani was helping make some sort of dish that apparently required green beans to be levitated in the steam over a pot. “From before her Mistress be passing.”

“Oh,” said Harry. He remembered Hani explaining how her Mistress had been a researcher, but… “I didn’t realize her Mistress had been at the OMRL.”

“Not a librarian, no, no,” Moggy squeaked. “But she is living near Oxford since she is very small, and Hani with her, so sometimes the elves is seeing Hani in town.”

“Huh. You all seem to have a very tight-knit community. It must be different being at the castle.”

“Different and the same, Master Harry. It is… Moggy missed his master very much, and there is no single person to look after, but elves here is being treated very well, very well indeed, and so many in one place. They is all being very sociable.”

Moggy tugged his ears, glancing over at the other elves again, and Harry had to laugh at the slight sternness that had slipped into his tone.

“They’re certainly not chatty with the students,” he said, a bit louder than strictly necessary. “Though friendly enough, and they take good care of us. And the cooking! I gain weight just thinking about the meals.”

The elves within earshot noticeably perked up, their ears straightening with pride and their magic flaring with a bit more exuberance. Moggy smiled up at him, brow crinkling.

"Master Harry is sure he is a Ravenclaw?" he asked.

"Erm. Yes?"

"Moggy is simply observing that he seems very much a Slytherin. And he is spending much time together with his Slytherin friend. Perhaps Master Harry was sorted wrong?"
"Ug," said Harry, mind jumping back to being cornered by Floyd and Kirke outside of the library. Had everyone noticed that he and Severus were spending so much time together? "He's not my friend. We just work well together, is all."

"As Master Harry says."

Harry rolled his eyes. "How did you come to be employed here, anyways?" he asked, hasty to change the subject. "I mean, you said your Master went to America, but does that mean he broke his, um, bond with you?"

"Oh, no!" Moggy said, sounding for the first time like a properly animated house elf in his distress. "Master would never do such a thing to Moggy! Moggy is a good elf, and Master knows that!"

"I didn't mean to—I just mean, Hani was willed to Hogwarts, so that she wouldn't be without a bond after her Mistress died. Can you have multiple bonds?"

"Many elves if having many bonds, if their family is big," Moggy said. "But Moggy is not bound to Master Headmaster, no. Moggy's Master simply be ordering Moggy to come work for Hogwarts. Many family elves is working for Hogwarts when school is in session."

"Is that why there's so many fewer over the holiday? I thought I was imagining it, since there's not a good way to, you know, count."

"Yes. There is being thirty less elves at Hogwarts, when school is out."

"Huh," said Harry. "Well, I suppose you don't need as many elves when there's not students to feed or clean up after. And Merlin forbid you not have enough cleaning to do."

"A good elf will find cleaning to do," Moggy said, a bit scandalized at the thought of ever not having enough work. "A good elf will make their family's home the cleanest it has ever been, if the family is away."

"Alright. I suppose it would be easier to clean without people getting underfoot." Realizing Moggy would probably be just as upset at the thought of his Master ever being in the way, he quickly searched for another question to derail the elf with. "And, um. The elves here. You said they're not bound to a single person, the way you are. Are they bound to the castle, then?"

"They is bound to the office of the Headmaster," Moggy explained. "And whoever holds there is in control of the bond, but they is not specifically Master Headmaster's elves, you see. Moggy is told it is written in the charter, that the elves aren't bound to any staff in particular, but we is to be told by the Headmaster what to do. And the Headmaster is telling us to obey the teachers like they would obey him, but us isn't being bound to them."

"So you—your master could just tell you to obey Dumbledore without having to free you, and it's all the same."

"Not the same," Moggy insisted, but Harry just nodded, because he meant it as a generalization.

"And you said he—he went to an American Library? I thought the OMRL librarians had a bone to pick with them."

"Yes, well..." The house elf shuffled his feet, picking at a fraying edge of a bit of embroidery on his blue-grey pillow case as he gave a discreet glance back towards his fellow elves. "These is being dark times, young Master," he said lowly. "Master is thinking Hogwarts will be safe for Moggy, but Moggy isn’t sure anywhere is left being safe for witches and wizards, in Britain." Moggy leaned in a
bit closer, eyeing an elf floating a bowl towards the replica of the high table at the far end of the kitchen. “Even Hogwarts, if Master Harry will excuse Moggy for saying so. If I’s were a Hogwarts elf truly, I’d iron my hands for saying such things, but Moggy sees thing these elves don’t…”

“What sort of things?” Harry asked, fascinated, but the elf shook his head.

“Moggy is saying too much,” he said, standing up stoutly. “And ’tis being a holiday. Forgives this old elf, young Master.” And with that he bowed and hurried away.

Harry stared after him, rubbing at his forehead before pausing and wondering where the habit had come from. What did it matter? If even elves were convinced Hogwarts wasn’t safe—well, then he was safest with the elves, because who else would think so? He’d already planned to stay hidden down here. Even if Voldemort did send someone to force him to the meeting, if they couldn’t find him… and the elves would protect him, right? Most people didn’t think anything of elf magic, thought it was all minor housework since they didn’t use wands (and wouldn’t even if they were allowed, partially for fear of upsetting their humans and partially because they had no need for them) but he’d spent enough time in the kitchens to know an elf’s magic was just as powerful as your average student’s. More, he thought, considering elves weren’t even really using spells. While the elves might not be doing NEWT-level charms projects, where a wizard would need to know exactly which spell to use in which situation, the elves just bent their magic to do exactly what they wanted. He didn’t know if any wizards could do anything like it. Dumbledore, maybe, his magic being the force it was. And then Voldemort as well—but Harry didn’t want to think of that.

No, the elves were powerful in their own unique sense, which was all the more apparent when his ward seemed to flicker again, letting through for a brief moment all the magic in the kitchens: the platters of food coming together and being floated forward, layered with magic to keep them warm; dishes and cutlery trailing through the air as a team of young elflings set the head table and several seats at the front of the others; a large barrel with—

The ward snapped shut again, and for a moment Harry felt as though there was a piece of him missing. He remembered what he had read about the construction of the null ward: it was double layered, keeping magic both in and out, so those inside wouldn’t have their magic leave the ward and be cut off from returning. If his magic was being cut away every time the ward split open… Harry looked back down at his book and started reading with renewed vigor. He had to figure out why the ward was malfunctioning, or else he would have to take it off.

He focused so deeply that when it came time for dinner the elves who failed to rouse him from his seat called Hani, and she banished his book from his hands and threatened to not to bring it back if he didn’t go and eat. Harry was angry for a minute, but then he remembered he had promised he wouldn’t be like her mistress and work himself sick, so he sighed and went off to eat. But the longer his mind had to wander, the less of an appetite he had, and the more he was just pushing the food around his plate. Eventually he forced himself to scarf a large portion of it down, a tactic that made him feel nauseous but gave him the excuse to return to his stool by the fire, and Hani warily came back over.

“Is Master Harry not spending his New Year’s Eve with the other students?” she asked.

Harry shook his head. “Why would I?” he said, feigning a grin—not very well, apparently, because his expression just caused her to look even more concerned. “Only the elves really know how to celebrate the New Year. Could I have my book back now, please?”

She frowned, but with a snap of her fingers the book was settled on his lap. “Master Harry has been spending his time with that nasty Slytherin,” she said, and paused to chew on the side of her lip. Harry really hoped she wasn’t going to imply anything… “Elves is hearing things, Master Harry.
There is being Slytherins who are being supporters of… of you-know-who.”

Harry blinked at the odd phrase. He did know who, but why wouldn’t she just say the Dark Lord, if she didn’t want to say Voldemort?

“You think Severus is one of them,” he summarized. Hani nodded slowly, and tugged her already drooping ears down even more.

He considered her for a moment. He didn’t want Hani involved any more than she had to be, but he’d always trusted her, and he thought she would stick with him even if she knew the full extent to which he’d gotten mixed up with the Death Eater business. He hoped so, at least, because it didn’t feel right to hide things from her when she was asking directly.

“You’re right,” he said, and Hani’s eyes widened. “Not officially yet, I don’t think. But—that’s what Halloween was. A Death Eater thing. I don’t like the group at all; they’re horrible and violent people, and prejudiced doesn’t even begin to describe it. But Severus, he… I can trust him, even if I don’t agree with his world views.”

“But he is doing dark magics!” Hani squeaked.

“So was I,” he reminded her. Possibly not the best thing he could say to ease her worries, but better to get it sorted out now. If not better, at least the more adult thing—those two he was finding more and more not to be mutually exclusive. “Look, it’s just a matter of—know your enemy, and all that. There’s going to be a lot of Dark Magic thrown around in the next few years, and if I want to stay safe, I’m gonna have to know what I’m up against. That’s why I went on Halloween. That’s why Severus and I are learning to defend ourselves which, yes, sometimes means learning the magic we’re going to have to defend ourselves against. We learn hexes in defense class, too. This is just a higher level.”

Hani stared at him, lip quivering, and said softly, “Master Harry shouldn’t get involved in such things. Master Harry should be staying far away and doing his research and finding home.”

Harry huffed a single voiceless laugh, carding his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, well, I’d like that, but I think trouble has a way of finding me whether I want it to or not.” But he frowned and furrowed his brow and thought until his head hurt, trying to piece together the vague faceless, voiceless memories he had left from the future, trying to give substance to the suspicions he carried. He couldn’t find the evidence he wanted, but he voiced his thought anyways. “Besides, I think even when I do get back, I’m going to need this stuff.”

Someone had tried to teach him occlumency, after all, and someone had found him the book to be sure he really learned it, though—he didn’t think he’d really wanted to learn it, since it was only after he started with the meditation exercises that he’d begun to understand what he was doing. And most kids weren’t being taught occlumency, or the patronus charm, and he didn’t think it had been exactly normal to learn about the unforgivables through first-hand experience, either. He couldn’t really remember much of that, either, he only remembered being put under the imperius over and over until he could throw it off. He didn’t think that was even legal, so there must have been a reason—

His headache got worse the more he dug for absent memories. He was used to headaches—why?—but it made it hard to hold onto a train of thought. He was going to have to learn to control himself from getting caught up in trying to figure out things he shouldn’t even want to know the truth of. Especially if his null ward failed. The headaches he got from magic in class were bad enough. And Hani was still looking at him with concern.

“But Master Harry—you mustn’t mind if Hani is saying so, but Master Harry is too young to need to
fight.”

“Wars are started by the old, but fought by the young,” Harry countered dryly, not really sure where he had heard that but this time having the sense not to dig too much into it. He thought instead back on the list of Death Eaters he’d left himself. So many were his age; Regulus and Crouch Jr. were younger, and he knew that several of the students even below them were already looking forward to joining, even if he hadn’t written any of the younger years down. He wasn’t sure when the war was going to begin in earnest, since he hadn’t written that, or when it would end. But these were his contemporaries, so if he was young, they all were.

That probably wouldn’t comfort Hani, either, and seeing her expression he took pity and a different approach. “Besides, if I’m lucky and somehow stay out of it, it won’t hurt me to be able to defend myself. There’s plenty of bad people out there who aren’t Death Eaters, I’m sure.”

Hani looked ready to protest again, but then the bells rang seven PM, and her ears twitched up. She excused herself to get back to work, but Harry was fairly certain the topic wasn’t done between them. She had all night to start up the conversation again, after all.

Instead, he settled back into his book. It took him a bit longer to focus on it again, and every now and then he caught himself staring off towards the elves, watching as they performed their customary full wash-down of the kitchen and the dishes and the long tables, which they still scrubbed down in full, despite that there was only a handful eating at them over the holiday. Eventually, however, he managed to get lost in his reading. Perhaps a bit too lost, considering he had to read a number of sections over again when he realized he’d read them without understanding what they really said, but it was better than nothing, and better than thinking about Death Eaters and Voldemort and the gaps in his future memory…

The elves, for their part, ignored him just as well as he ignored them. When a few came by to mop the hearth, he put his feet up on the stool without even thinking about it, and the worked around and under him and it wasn’t until the painting-hole door opened that he lost his focus again and wondered why he was more perched than seated.

Flitwick, the one who had opened the painting (though not come through) didn’t notice Harry, either, and Harry tried not to move around too much or attract attention to where he was seated. He’d rather no one know where he was, not even Flitwick. Not that he thought Flitwick would ever give up Harry’s position if Voldemort sent someone to the castle after him, but he might mention it to another teacher, and Harry didn’t know where all of them stood. He didn’t have to try too hard; the elves crowded around the door, staring up at the professor with wide eyes, and he cleared his throat with a high pitched rasp and addressed them:

“Happy New Year’s Eve, friends!” he began, and the elves chorused it back to him in a series of squeaky words and giggles. Flitwick waited until they were quiet again to go on. “Now, as you are all aware, the children will be returning to us on Tuesday evening. We’ve all had a relaxingly uneventful holiday, but over the next few days you will have to be working your absolute hardest to get the dormitories cleaned and the start of term feast prepared.”

Around him, the elves seemed to droop a bit, some even muttering to each other, but then Flitwick grinned, and with a flick of his wrist performed the same magic that sent dishes up to the tables Great Hall. Not a related spell, but the exact same magic, wandless and all, only—it must have been in reverse. Harry was so startled he hardly noticed the huge pyramids of butterbeer bottles that suddenly filled the table closest to him.

“For now, however, you are all released officially on holiday!” the professor announced, and though he said more Harry couldn’t hear it over the sudden din of house elves shrieking with glee.
There was a great deal of fuss as the elves descended on the butterbeer—or ascended, rather; there were enough bottles collected along the tables that Harry wouldn’t be surprised if there was more butterbeer than elf in the room. Flitwick left rather quickly, not even glancing Harry’s way, and when the painting swung shut over the entrance even the last holdouts of the elves hurried to join their comrades on the tables. Butterbeer bottles flew through the air as they were redistributed, and one of the elflings even brought him one on her own, smiling shyly up at him. Hani, perched on the end of the duplicate of Ravenclaw table, a bottle already in hand, nodded at him in encouragement.

He smiled and took the bottle from little elf, who grinned and scampered off. Pulling his sleeve over his hand to untwist the cap, Harry had to quickly press the rim of it to his lips when the foam threatened to overflow. The elves, for whatever reason, seemed to delight in letting the foam splash out onto the floor, giggling nervously to each other and seeming to twitch with the urge to clean it up, but resisting. They had done that the year before, too, and Harry had found it odd, but he hadn’t thought to ask about it. Maybe that was why they needed so much butterbeer—he didn’t remember there being this much the year before.

He watched Hani engage in lively discussion with some of the elves as he sipped off the sugary foam. He recognized the ones she spoke to; Trumpet and Wash, they were called. He’d only ever exchanged a few words with them, like most of the other elves, but more and more he’d noticed that when Hani was working in the kitchen one of them was nearby. Compared to the year before, when she had been too hesitant to join in the games and spent most of her time with Harry on the outskirts of the celebration, she had grown. Maybe she had felt as Moggy did, back then, like the Hogwarts elves weren’t quite complete without a single person in their lives as ‘master’. She looked happy enough now, though, as did all the other elves.

Harry, on the other hand, hadn’t settled so comfortably. Here he was again, celebrating the New Year in the kitchens, after all—sure, he’d been invited to a party, but that wasn’t exactly an achievement when there was some sort of violently inclined megalomaniac running that show. He had spent the summer at the OMRL, but even so he hadn’t found his way home. And even without his memories getting in his way, he couldn’t exactly think of the people he’d met in the last two years as friends, not when he was keeping so much from them…

Well, that wasn’t quite true. He thought of Hector and Pandora as friends, but he thought he was doing pretty poorly at returning the favor. No, the only person he’d let in on any of his secrets was Severus, and that was more a comment on Harry’s questionable judgement than anything else. The Slytherin had only learned about Harry’s magic sensing because Harry had thought—oh, how had he been so—so stupid? Now that he thought about it, of course he would never be able to be a spy against the Death Eaters. Any information he gathered would be twenty years out of date when he returned to the nineties, if it were even relevant to anything at all. But for whatever reason he’d thought he’d be just fine going to a Death Eater rally, and then Voldemort’s terrifying magic had been enough to stupefy Harry at a single touch…

He shuddered even thinking about it, and took a long swig of the butterbeer. He’d rather forget about Voldemort’s magic, and never be in the Dark Lord’s presence ever again, and that was why he was hiding away down here, wasn’t it? He wished he’d taken away that memory, too, because he hated even remembering feeling so entirely helpless. And with the ward being temperamental…

If only butterbeer would affect him as it affected the elves! Within ten minutes of the butterbeer being opened, several of the elves were already beginning to look rosy-cheeked and grinning like fools. Even Hani, who was moving at a respectable pace and had only had half of her bottle, was blinking rather heavily when she saw him looking and came to settle on the hearth beside him. There was barely any alcohol in butterbeer at all, but it seemed to affect them like—well, he’d seen the other Ravenclaws drunk before. He’d meant what he had said to Severus, and hadn’t had any of the
He didn’t know where the secret stash was kept, though; it was usually kept safe by one of the seventh years, so even if he wanted to get to it he’d have to figure out which of them to ask… or would he? He looked down at Hani thoughtfully. If anyone knew where the Ravenclaws kept their firewhiskey, it would be the elves. If Hani knew, it would only be a matter of convincing her…

And that meant waiting, he thought, until she’d had a bit more butterbeer. Which gave him more time to think, which was the very thing he was trying to avoid. Every time he heard something that sounded like the creak of the painting opening he jumped, half expecting wizards to come rushing through demanding he come with them, though the painting only opened once, and that was just to let a group of elves carrying some sort of rug over their heads parade out. But if there were Death Eaters coming for him—however improbable it might seem for Voldemort to waste the effort, the louder parts of his mind wouldn’t let it rest—if they were coming for him, did he really want to be drunk for that?

Watching a house elf doing some sort of jig tumble off the table, splashing butterbeer all over the floor, he thought it probably wouldn’t matter. Actually, it would probably be better: if he was going to be brought before Voldemort, being drunk might help him get through it.

Assuming Voldemort didn’t just kill him in disgust.

“Hani,” he said, after she’d finished a whole bottle of butterbeer and started on a second and was starting to find everything worth smiling about. “Could you do me a favor?”

“What— hic!— is Master Harry needing?” she asked, whole body twitching with the hiccup.

“Well, seeing as the House Elves know where everything is at Hogwarts, I was hoping you could go and find something for me.”

“Find something?”

“See, I don’t know where the seventh years keep the firewhiskey—”

Before he could finished, Hani jumped up to slap her hand over his mouth. Or, at least, she tried to, and managed to his his chin, but the surprise cut him off anyways.

“Master Harry is— hic!— not speaking of these things!” she insisted.

Harry frowned. “But you know. Everyone knows. And you’re the ones who clean the common rooms, and I know for a fact none of us are good enough at putting everything…”

“Elves be picking up many things,” Hani said sagely, the leathery skin of her cheeks flushing as she smiled even more broadly. “But we is not always looking too closely, Master Harry, and it is always being the elves who cannot read, picking up bottles that might be labeled inconveniently…”

“Ah,” said Harry, bemused. Plausible deniability. “Well, okay. But the bottles themselves are not the problem. Many students are, after all, in possession of bottles of various sorts. And, see, there’s a bottle hidden by the Seventh Years somewhere, which in part belongs to me, since I didn’t have any of it at, er… when it was offered to me. So if you could, ah, do me the favor of fetching the bottle for me, an of-age wizard, I would be most grateful.”

Hani peered up at him curiously. “Is Master Harry not enjoying his butterbeer?” she asked. “Hani is being sure you is liking it…”
“Well, yes, I do, but,” he stammered, searching for an appropriate explanation that would both get him what he wanted and keep Hani from worrying. He couldn’t very well say ‘I am terrified out of my wits that Voldemort is going to show up and whisk me away to Malfoy Manor and would much rather be drunk in the event that it does happen”—not only because it sounded ridiculous but also because Hani would probably faint and that would get him no closer to his goal. “See, humans aren’t affected nearly as much as butterbeer, and since I am of age, if I weren’t at the castle, I would probably be enjoying stronger stuff, right. And all of you seem to be having so much fun, and I’d really like to be, you know, part of it, as much as I can, being a human and a student and all…”

Hani glanced over her shoulder at the other elves just as one toppled off the table, grabbing another on his way down and bringing her with him. When Hani looked back, she did her best to look reproachful, though the flush rather ruined it. “Master Harry is wanting— hic!”

If Harry were in a better mood, he might have laughed. Recognizing that, he forced his lips to pull back into the mockery of a grin and hoped Hani was too drunk to notice it. “Kettle, meet cauldron.”

Sheepish as she looked, Hani still wasn’t completely sold on his plan. Not telling the professors where the students kept their alcohol was one thing, apparently, but… “Master Harry is a student,” she said unhappily. “A good elf is— hic!— not…”

“I’m an of age wizard, and it’s a holiday, and I will be with you and the other hundred house elves the whole night. Technically I could walk down to Hogsmeade and get a drink at the inn, but I’d much rather stay in the castle with my friends.”

Mentioning their friendship seemed to do it, because Hani’s wide green eyes suddenly got watery, and even as she hiccupped she let out a little wail and pulled him into a hug, and with a snap of her fingers a bottle of firewhiskey appeared on the little table by his chair. After a moment of staring at it, she snapped her fingers again. The cap unscrewed from the firewhiskey and it tilted midair to pour into Harry’s empty butterbeer bottle, which seemed suddenly equipped to hold more liquid than it should have. Another snap at the firewhiskey bottle disappeared.

“Thanks, Hani,” Harry said, this time with a genuine (if slight) smile. “You’re a great friend.”

Hani giggled loudly, taking another swig of her own bottle to hide her pleased embarrassment. Then the other house elves were calling her over for what sounded like a cutlery polishing contest (they couldn’t really think that was fun, could they?) and Harry made a little shooing motion.

He may have liked Hani as well as anyone, but he had definitely been lying. He didn’t want to be a ‘part’ of the celebrations at all. He was only spending New Year’s Eve with the house elves because he knew that if any group were dedicated to protecting the students and magically powerful enough to stop Voldemort from getting to him, it was them. Well, no; that was a lie, too, he thought bitterly. It wasn’t the only reason. He really didn’t have anywhere else to be. But he didn’t want to be a part of the celebration so much as on the edge of it, looking on like the elves were some sort of bad comedy program on the telly, like always seemed to have been on in his spotty memories of his Aunt’ and Uncle’s house.

Ow. For Christ’s sake, what had he forgotten that made even brushing the memories he had left so bloody painful?

Sighing, he tentatively lifted his bottle of firewhiskey, sniffing it. The very smell seemed to clear the paths of his sinuses, and his eyes watered as though he were smelling something spicy—cinnamon, it seemed to have that sort of sense, underneath the stench of strong alcohol—and there was some sort of magic lingering in it. Well, there was nothing for it. He’d taken plenty of foul potions before… well, he thought he had, even if he couldn’t remember any in particular. This couldn’t be any worse,
Wrong, he quickly found out, as he struggled not to choke up the ambitious swig he’d taken. His whole face felt like it was burning, throat being scraped along by cat claws intent on shredding it apart, tears blurring his vision and snot emerging as a practical river streaming out his nose, and the magic sunk into his chest as it burned, adding to the pain a horribly uncomfortable feeling not unlike a limb waking up from having the circulation cut off. He held it in, skin on his face stretched taut as he struggled to force the burning down—but after he swallowed the last of it he couldn’t help but cough, which he quickly buried by bringing up the long sleep of his robes to his face and turning his face towards the fire. He swore when he coughed there were sparks flying, but maybe that was a trick of the fire hitting his tear-splattered glasses—

People drank that intentionally? He knew there was other alcohol that had to be less—less like torture to drink! If you were trying to enjoy yourself or drink away some problem or—or anything except for some sort of masochistic self-punishment—why on earth would you choose firewhiskey?

As he leaned over to set the bottle down by his feet and the world spun a bit, he found out why. Granted, he was only seventeen, and a small seventeen-year-old at that, but the magic that he’d felt in the firewhiskey seemed to be speeding up the process of transporting alcohol from the liquid to his bloodstream and his brain. Harry straightened up slowly, forgetting his task of putting the bottle down, and blinked several times. It felt as though his brain was being slowly transfigured into a sponge soaked with mud, which was heavier than a normal brain, and seemed to be pushing down against his eyes, which might account for the way the world had spun. In contrast to this sense of thickening, he could feel the magic coursing through him the way a potion might, dancing along quick and sharp and bright, and for a moment he got caught up in it, trying to figure out why this little bit of magic was so dominant in his mind…

Well, it must have been inside the null ward now, he reasoned after a few minutes. Except the magic, kept that weak, should have been rejected by the ward and kept outside… had it failed again? Did it feel weaker overall, or was it just the alcohol dulling his senses? He’d just had a mouthful… if that was just a gulp, what would it do to him to drink the whole bottle?

He looked down at it in apprehension. He didn’t think he could get through the whole bottle. But he hadn’t thought about Voldemort’s potential kidnapping squad and anger and his own horribly doomed fate for the whole, what, five minutes since he had tried it? That had to be something of a success, right? Not that trying to drink away his problems could really be counted as a success in the face of the wrath of a Dark Lord, but…

Harry took another gulp. A small, controlled amount, this time. It still burned enough to make him retch.

Eventually he turned his mind back to reading, hoping it would hold his attention, but it was a failing effort. Despite the rapid onset of the effects of the firewhiskey, he discovered it faded rather quickly, and after that first swig he couldn’t bring himself to swallow enough to get more than an echo of the feeling he’d had before, though the sense of thickness never quite faded. He wasn’t sure if it was a less obvious effect of the alcohol or a sign of his somehow still mounting anxiety (the only thing that kept him trying to make use of the bottle) that he was growing more and more jumpy, flinching at the slightest sound, of which the revelers were making many. Indeed, the longer the evening stretched, the noisier the house elves seemed to get. At one point particularly industrious group started building what they said was a model of Hogwarts out of butterbeer bottles, using some sort of sticking charm to hold the pieces together, though to Harry it looked more like the pyramid the bottles had been delivered in to begin with. The moment Harry managed to look back down at his page, the charm gave out, and all the bottles came crashing down. Harry toppled back off his stool at the cacophony,
and if he had fallen any further he would have ended up in the fire.

Before he could get up again, Hani was back, peering down at him. “Why is Master Harry being on the floor?” she asked.

“I didn’t mean to be…”

Hani blinked. “Is… Is Master Harry being… drunk?”

She was whispering, as though it were some terrible scandal, but it was the loudest whisper Harry had ever heard. He rolled his eyes as he reset his stool, and as he sat he examined the book, checking that no damage had been done to it. Madame Pince would have his head if there were. Luckily his bottle had been resting on the floor, and he hadn’t kicked it over. “You’re one to talk,” he said as he picked it up and considered taking another drink. “All of you are drunker than the Three Bs on a Friday night. And you’ve just had butterbeer.”

“Butterbeer is strong enough—hic!” Hani jumped about a foot at the force of her own hiccup, and even Harry couldn’t help a smile at the sight, but she went on earnestly. “Elves is not needing much, since elves is never being drinking, ever.”

"Why do the elves celebrate New Year's Eve so... enthusiastically?" Harry asked, carefully enunciating the word. "You didn't seem to do much on Christmas or Hallow's Eve or any of the other Holidays, except for helping the students really get into the spirit of it."

"New Year's Eve is being—is being the elves only Holiday," Hani explained. "We is not having time off except for New Year's. Not that we is wanting—hic!—any!"

"No other holidays?" Harry asked. Come to think of it, he had been down on boxing day, which was the servants' day off in the muggle world, he thought, and they'd all been as hard at work as ever...

"We is—hic!" Hani lost herself to a burst of giggling, and waited a minute, holding her breath until the hiccups were gone before speaking again. "Elves is spending wizards' holidays cooking and making the holidays happy," she explained. "We is being most happy when our Masters is happy, Master Harry, most happy indeed!"

"So why New Year's, then? What's the tradition there?"

"Elves is being gibben—gibb—given the whole night to—to let out the evil."

Harry stared at her incredulously. *Let out the evil?* Were House Elves secretly demonic monsters, whose bonds to wizards were the only thing—no, that was ridiculous. Freed elves didn't just go about destroying the world, he thought—and oh, did that give him another headache, and he took a swig of firewhiskey, hoping that Hani was too far gone to notice the tears that filled his eyes at the horrible burn and his throbbing head. "The evil?" he asked, when he thought he'd be able to speak without coughing. It came out sounding rather raspy, but Hani didn't seem to mind.

"Oh yes. We is doing all sorts of terrible things." She giggled again. "We is not doing any cooking or cleaning or other tasks. We is drinking—" She waved her butterbeer bottle about, sloshing the foamy contents into the air and out onto the floor. "—until we is saying bad things about our Masters, and making absolutely horrible complaints, and we is daring, and—" She broke off and leaned close to Harry, whispering conspiratorially, "—and some is even wearing hats!"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "So it's a night to, um, get all that freedom stuff out of your system."

Hani nodded. "There isn't being any elf who is truly wanting freedom, especially not at Hoggywaw
"But you all have thoughts you'd rather not, at some point."

Hani nodded, and her ears drooped. "Hani is sometimes wishing her Mistress is still alive, that Hani is never bound to Hogwarts," she said, still in that loud whisper. "Hani is even sometimes wishing she is bound to Master Harry instead, but a good elf is... a good elf is..."

Her eyes began to well with tears again, and Harry, worried that she was going to start bawling on him, reached out to pat the hand that held the butterbeer bottle. "That's alright, Hani," he said. "You're a very good elf. So good I—sometimes I wish you were my elf, too." So that I could order you to keep my secrets, he didn't say, which was probably for the best because that dark thought wasn’t the whole truth and his words had managed to light Hani's face with a blush. She tugged her ears in front of her eyes.

"Master Harry is being too good," she mumbled. "We’s being bad on New Year’s."

"Oh no," he tried to assure her. "I am being very bad. Am very bad. I would never have an elf, myself. I—er—that is..."

His words seemed to tumble out of his mouth as he lost his line of reasoning. But he couldn’t tell if it was the firewhiskey—he did think it was the alcohol making his tongue and fingers feel thick, but he could be quite sure that he’d lost his thought to the fuzz it was making of his brain, or if he had stumbled onto a thought that was just not there anymore. Would he ever own a house elf? Maybe. They were really delightful companions, once you got to know them—at least Hani and that—that Mossy elf were nice enough. Some of them were rather bossy—but the nice ones. He knew they had to bound to their wizard and that it was basically slavery, in that sense, but Hani and Mo...lly? Mommy? Well, they thought it was better to have a family, rather than being at Hogwarts...

But he’d been, in essence, treated like an elf by his Aunt and Uncle when he was a kid—he could remember that much. He didn’t think he could ever do anything that to another living being, human or elf. But you couldn’t pay an elf. He had a thought in his head, of elves being profoundly insulted at the very suggestion of being paid, but he couldn’t place that—and there was another gap to make his head hurt. It was like someone was taking a hammer and tapping it against his skull, and his brain was rattling around inside with all the empty space left from the memories he had taken. That wasn’t how brains or memories worked, and the spell wasn’t removing anything, just locking it away, but he took another gulp to try and fill the imagined space. The taste wasn’t so bad now—he couldn’t really taste it at all, his tongue strangely numb feeling under the bite.

One of Hani’s elf friends waved her away again, and she glanced at him, set her bottle down like she intended to come back, and hurried over. Harry wasn’t sure if it was her swaying or the fresh alcohol burning through his blood making it look like she was, but he was struck with another wave of fear as she left him—

Elves? He thought elves could defend him against Voldemort? Elves who got drunk on butterbeer and—Melin, some of them were bringing out instruments. Harry took another swig, and hoped that before the Death Eaters came he could make himself too drunk to care. He wasn’t sure how much alcohol that would take, but he took another gulp in short order, and watched the elves as the music truly began.

There was a sort of makeshift band between them, a little three-stringed fiddle and a sort of pipe instrument, maybe an oboe, and the songs that they began to play were as high pitched and squeaky as the voices that picked them up. Soon there were house elves spinning left and right in circles that formed as much on top of the tables as on the floors, and there were little feet stomping out a beat
that didn’t quite line up with the instruments—and all of them seemed to be doing different dances, even as they moved in circles all together. He couldn’t catch more than a word or two here or there, because they all seemed to be singing different versions of things, but that didn’t seem to matter to them, and every time a song ended, even when the voices were all at different points, they’d break into a great cheer.

After some time, a new cry went up, and the music puttered out, and though he couldn’t tell what the elves were shouting about he could see the way they flooded towards the open painting-hole. Were they leaving? They couldn’t leave. He had to stay here, hidden, so Voldemort couldn’t find him—but he had to stay with the elves, because—he watched them topple over each other, hurrying towards the exit. Was there any use to this at all? He tilted his head back, bottle to his lips, and maybe it would knock him out so he wouldn’t have to find out until he woke up again…

Too ambitious. Harry spluttered, and some of the alcohol came back up his throat, though it had turned to a black steam, and little sparks of magic danced through it like a thundercloud. Coughing, he tried to wave it away, the remaining liquid sloshing in the bottle—had he really only had half?—and his hand collided with the an elf’s ear.

“Master Harry,” Hani said, her eyes wide as she tried poorly to hold back giggles, the smoke clearing, “Tumpet is saying Master Flitwick is going to be charming fireworks over the lake!”

Harry blinked at her several times, thinking about it. He didn’t think he’d ever seen a proper show of fireworks in person before, but… “I can’t go out with—the professors,” he managed to slur out. “We is all going up to the tower,” Hani explained. She grabbed Harry’s hand—the one without the bottle of firewhiskey—and pulled him with a surprising strength from the stool. He didn’t feel particularly tipsy, but his head spun as he stood upright. “The Professors is down below. Come on, Master Harry!”

How they made it up to the astronomy tower, any of them, without toppling back down the stairs, Harry didn’t know. Among the elves, at least, he looked rather sober, or at least he hoped he did, since they went up the moving stairways and the portraits there were the worst gossips in the whole school. Several times a group of elves would break away to start arguments with some of the paintings, though they were giggling mightily as they did so, and the portraits’ scoldings were good-natured. But eventually they made it to the astronomy tower, and while Harry got dizzy on the spiral stairs the blast of cold air as they came out to the top did wonders to wake him up.

When he realized he was blocking the exit, he tottered over towards the edge of the tower and sat himself in the wide crenel of the parapet, his legs dangling out over the steep drop, and Hani squeezed in beside him. Several of the elves had climbed up as well, giggling as they clung to each other. Down below he could see a small group—the Professors, most likely, dark shapes in the moonlight making their way to the bank of the lake, where the tree he liked to study under stretched its branches out over the water. The smallest moved the furthest forward, though it moved in a halting, zig-zag path. Harry squinted. His eyes were still adjusting to the light, but that was Flitwick, surely.

“I think Flitwick’s drunk,” he told Hani. “How’s he gonna do fireworks?”

“Professor Flitwick is having a bit of goblin blood, he is,” she said, her voice sleepy, and she hardly seemed to notice as she leaned against him. For warmth, probably; she was just in her pillowcase and even with his cloak and robes Harry could feel the nip of the cold on his nose. “Goblins is being creatures of fire. Professor Flitwick is being able to make fireworks in his sleep, Hani thinks.”

Harry blinked. Goblin? Well, it made sense—mostly the students would gossip that he was part elf
due to his stature, but Flitwick had never seemed much like an elf to Harry. He squinted harder, trying to see what the Professor was doing down there—

And then the tiny shape was thrown back by the force of the magic that erupted from his wand, light speeding forward and exploding over the lake, trails of light bursting out in every direction to a chorus of elf voices under the resounding boom that shook the trees below. Flitwick was on his feet before the lights had faded, and he threw out spell after spell, magic twisting itself into lights that danced across the water, some spiralling up into the sky and bursting into showers of gold and silver lights, some taking shape into forms like animals that swooped about leaving streaks through the darkness, each coming with a crack or a whistle or a rumbling echo that struck them late like, thunder after lightning—

For a moment Harry’s ward faltered and he gawked at it all. His tiny Professor had never seemed capable of summoning such power. His charms demonstrations were always perfect balances of control and skill, never using more than the precise amount of magic he needed to, but this—this was raw, and even when the ward snapped shut again he could still feel the echoes of it, even from this distance…

Harry wasn’t sure when exactly the show had started, but it ended in an overwhelming burst as the midnight bells began to toll. All the magic in the air over the lake came together in one glowing orb high above the lake, and on the twelfth strike it burst so bright it lit up the whole forest clear as day, and Harry wasn’t sure which of the lights showering down like starfall were from Flitwick’s spell and which were the remnants of that burst swimming in his eyes.

The bells kept ringing, even though midnight had come and gone and the group of Professors far below had finally turned to make their way back up to the castle, Hagrid hoisting the less-than-surefooted Flitwick onto his back like a child. Behind them, the house elves had started dancing again, the reedy tones of the pipe, fiddle, and voices nearly drowned out by the stamp of bare feet against the stone and clapping of little hands in a range of tempos not quite following the music. Harry, mesmerized by the lights and the alcohol and the energy of it all, held back no longer, and his head fell back as he laughed and laughed and laughed, and the weight of anxiety lifted from his shoulders and faded away into the sound and the night.

Hani looked up at him, her green eyes sparkling as the last of the fireworks dancing over the lake as she smiled. He grinned back. Voldemort hadn’t come for him, or sent any Death Eaters, and whatever happened tomorrow the old year was done and Harry was safe.

“We survived, Hani,” he said when he found his voice again, taking her hand in his and squeezing it. “Fuck all that nonsense we put up with. We survived.”

Harry found Severus on the stairs between the kitchen and the Great Hall coming up for lunch the next morning. “You look like you were trampled by a herd of erumpets,” the Slytherin boy observed.

“But don’t remind me,” Harry groaned. “And how are you so chipper? Last time you went to a party, Lucius Malfoy was trying to pour fairy wine down your throat.”

“Ah, so that’s it.” Severus surveyed the dark circles under Harry’s eyes and the way he was squinting towards the lights as they came up into the main foyer. “You overindulged. And what were
you drinking last night?”

“Firewhiskey,” Harry grumbled. He didn't doubt half his hangover was really his brain trying to handle the _obfuscus_, but Severus didn't need to know that. “Nasty stuff, but all the elves were getting drunk off butterbeer and I was feeling, um, left out.”

“And how exactly did you get ahold of firewhiskey?”

“Hani,” he mumbled, now glaring fully at the bright white light streaming in from the cloudy skies outside the windows of the foyer. “Convinced her with some squiggly logic, but now she won’t let me eat in the kitchens or find me a hangover cure.”

“How terrible that must be. How ever will you survive your own mistakes.”

“Lay off. I suppose you didn’t have anything, then?”

“I’m more surprised that you did.”

“The elves were—”

“Last time, you rejected the fairy wine just as readily as I did, if I remember correctly.”

“Last time we were in a room full of—ugh, why.” The ceiling in the Great Hall was even brighter than the windows, swirls of light snowfall disappearing just above the end of the rafters. Severus snorted and steered Harry by the elbow to sit with him at the end of Slytherin table, where instantly two place settings of soup and sandwiches appeared, followed shortly by mugs of steaming tea, prepared to their preference (Severus’s, a strong black; Harry’s lighter herbal brew, with an indulgent spoonful of sugar).

“Since I’m feeling generous,” said Severus, snagging Harry’s mug and tipping the contents of a small vial into it. "Headache potion. Should ease some of the ill effects of your hangover, though the best cure is simply lots and lots of water. How much did you drink?"

"I'm not sure," Harry mumbled, breathing in the fragrant steam as he accepted his mug again and cupped it between his palms. It masked the smell of the hot sandwich on his plate, which was making his stomach turn. "One of the elves said I was drinking too slowly to really get drunk, but then again, he was quite drunk himself, and I was quite dizzy."

"Drinking with the house elves," Severus muttered. "I've never heard of a more pathetic way to celebrate the New Year. Is that an annual tradition?"

Harry shrugged. "I don’t think I really celebrated before last year, honestly. And Hani is my closest ally."

"You consider an elf to be your closest..."

"I've always liked elves. Well, sort of. I think there was one that was trying to kill me."

"...trying to kill you?"

Harry frowned. He really wasn’t sure what the story was there, and his head gave a warning throb, meaning it was something he had buried away and shouldn’t be thinking about, let alone mentioning. He wondered if there was still some alcohol in his system, but he really wasn’t sure how much he had drunk, nor was he experienced with it enough to know what amount would effect him. Could alcohol still affect you eight hours later? There were boys in the dorms who boasted that they would
drink a whole bottle of firewhiskey just to get started, but Harry had never seen that actually happen, and since the Ravenclaws on the whole kept their parties to the end of term (unlike what everyone said about the Hufflepuffs), he doubted that was nothing more than a bluff.

Instead he took a long sip of the tea, only to remember that he would have to take of his warded beads in order for the potion to pass through. Frowning, he shook his hand until they slipped from his wrist—

—and the moment they were gone the hall erupted into chaos. He groaned again; he had forgotten how horribly magical the Great Hall actually was, with the enchanted ceiling and the house elves' spells on the tables and all that, and while the hall was nearly empty the sudden full-force blast of six different people's magic all at once made his head spin in an entirely new way. He downed the tea in three great gulps while he grabbed for the beads again, and the moment the last of the liquid was through his mouth he shoved his hand through them again, relaxing as the null ward resealed itself over his skin.

"Charming," Severus remarked.

"Thank you for that," Harry replied, blinking several times as the light became more bearable and the smell of food turned appealing. "Honestly, it's a relief."

"Well, I was going to give it to you after we practice, so you'll have to deal with the headache you're no doubt going to have this afternoon."

Harry frowned. "I thought we had decided to be done until next weekend."

Severus hummed into his spoonful of soup, swallowing before he spoke. "I changed my mind."

"Why?" Harry asked. It wasn't that he objected—if Severus was able to find chinks in his barriers, no doubt Voldemort could, and while he could build up new theoretical defenses in his own time he couldn't put faith in them without the tests. But his blood ran cold with a thought. "Did someone—at the party—?"

"I felt brushes on the edges of my mind several times," Severus replied. "No one pushed further than that, but I noticed it, now that I know what to look for. A few seemed particularly surprised to find new defenses." His lip curled up in distaste.

"Who?"

"Why, Lucius, of course."

He blew on another spoonful of soup while Harry considered that. Lucius Malfoy was a legilimens? Harry had underlined Malfoy’s name about ten times on his list of Death Eaters and people not to trust, but he’d never been worried about Malfoy legilimizing him. He was clearly in the thick of things, since both the New Year’s Eve and Halloween events had been hosted at Malfoy Manor, but when they’d met Harry hadn’t been particularly impressed by Malfoy, nor Malfoy by him. Harry knew that Severus and Lucius were… he wasn’t sure if ‘friends’ was the right word, but Lucius was his ‘in’ with the Death Eaters. Whatever the basis for their relationship, it definitely did not extend to Harry, and Harry did not want it to. He got the impression that his distaste was something more than the whole Death Eater thing, but he didn’t know what—and that feeling was getting old extremely quickly.

“You seem surprised,” Severus observed.

Harry forced himself to shrug, turning back to his meal. “It just seems strange he would try to, um,
do that you. Last time you seemed pretty, um, chummy.”

“That’s one way to put it. I suppose you wouldn’t understand the intricacies of a Slytherin friendship.”

Harry did think there was such thing as a Slytherin friendship, but he kept that to himself. It probably wasn’t a good thing to be so biased, but even Regulus, who he actually liked, he could hardly expect to trust. “But you can’t have expected it, or you would have already learned to, er, protect yourself.”

Severus shrugged, soaking up the broth left at the bottom of his bowl with a torn roll. “Maybe, but I can’t be surprised. And it’s not like he was trying to pull up memories from deep in my mind. They—him and the others, they were just brushing my mind.”

“Others? Who else was it?”

“Orion Black. Evan’s dad. Lady Avery—once I got used to it, I… I think perhaps it might be a test. The pureblood elite love their tests. With legilimency… they go into a room looking to get the measure on everyone. If you can get into the surface of their thoughts, you get information, if not—then you still know they can occlude.”

Harry frowned. “I don’t recall anyone doing that at Halloween.”

“I’m pretty sure you only talked to two people, and that was Lucius and him, and those weren’t exactly instances of exchanging pleasantries.”

Harry hummed. He didn’t like the thought of a bunch of purebloods looking into Severus’s mind while he held Harry’s secrets, but if they really were on the surface… “And no one confronted you about—urk.”

“Is your head still hurting? How much did you drink? That was a strong potion—”

“No, it’s the ward,” Harry said, pulling back his sleeve to inspect the beads as he pushed down the wave of nausea that the brief moment of clear magic in his senses afforded. “It’s been acting up all morning… keeps flaring up.”

“You sure it’s not an after effect of getting pissed?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, but no, we will not be doing any tests to determine the effects of alcohol on magic sensing, thank you very much.”

“It could be useful. Wouldn’t you rather know ahead of time, if—”

Wincing as the beads grew cold again, Harry cut Severus off by letting his spoon fall as he stood up. “I need to go to the library. There’s a book on wards…”

“No?” Severus questioned, even as he stood to join Harry.

When their empty dishes disappeared from the table, the ward seemed to be in full working order, as Harry barely registered the switching spell that took it downstairs, but a moment later he was suddenly aware of every single candle floating below the enchanted ceiling—not as horrible as, say, walking into the full crowd of first years at the welcoming feast, but annoying nonetheless, like mosquitos he could not swat buzzing around his ears and at the edge of his vision.

“Now,” he confirmed, turning to lead the way. “I showed you what it’s like. If there’s something going wrong with the ward, I’d rather know now and get started making a new one before I get
stuck starting the term without it…”

“Alright,” said Severus, following Harry through the large doors. “But I mean it—we really should practice today. The party… even I have to admit, it made me nervous.”

Harry paused. They were alone in the landing for the moment, and there any portraits on the walls there, so it was more private than anywhere else on the path to the library. “Did something happen?” he asked lowly.

“What? Nothing out of the ordinary, for that sort of event, I suppose. It’s the whole of it that’s got me—there’s far more than just him that can use, ah, that sort of magic. I’m beginning to understand your urgency. The solution is to improve, which means practicing.”

“Alright,” said Harry. They would practice, but not just that—he was going to seal Severus’s memories away, and he was going to do it today. “We’ll practice, after we—”

“Mr. Harrigan!”

Harry shut his mouth quickly at the sound of Professor Slughorn’s voice calling him from the doorway of the Great Hall. If things like legilimency and Voldemort weren’t safe for them to talk about openly, dangerous mind-sealing magic was definitely out of the question. Least of all around someone like Slughorn, who had the subtlety of an erumpent with a hernia and a sometimes comical, mostly irritating tendency to gossip. And Slughorn wasn’t alone—there was an unfamiliar wizard drifting along with him, who Harry didn’t—

His thought was cut off as Harry was hit with another moment of overwhelmingly clear magic. For a moment he was dizzy on his feet, but he had just enough presence of mind to remember that he knew how to deal with this, and reached out to focus on Severus until he was able to sort through and separate everything around him. Slughorn and the other man drew forward, Slughorn’s voice feeling especially loud in his ears even as Harry failed to glean what he was actually saying, and Harry stayed rooted in place, breathing evenly and shaking his wrist, hoping the ward would reform over the hole that had torn in it. The professor reached them before it responded, his guest in tow, and Harry let out a breath of relief as the ward began to crawl shut. Slughorn didn’t seem to notice, but the other man shot Harry a sharp, inscrutable look, and for the briefest of moments before the ward sealed shut Harry got a touch of his magic—

Appearances lie. The man accompanying the Potions Master (tall and narrow next to Slughorn’s paunch, balding slightly, liver spots just beginning to stain the skin around his left eye and temple, greying hair pulled tightly back into a tail at his neck, elegant geometric embroidery in pale blue thread circling the cuffs and collar the only frivolity of his otherwise practical grey robes) seemed entirely unimposing. The tight smile playing at his lips but not his eyes suggested he was humoring Slughorn, but his patience growing thin.

But Harry was not confined to judging by appearances. He could sense magic, and while the man’s magic was being very carefully contained (almost like Severus’s, restricted to the boundaries of his body) there was only one magic that felt anything like it. It may not have been threatening to drown Harry the way it previously had, but it was the same.

The man next to Slughorn was completely, undeniably, inexplicably, Lord Voldemort.
“Yes, this is our Mr. Harrigan, and one of my own house, Mr. Snape,” Slughorn said, looking mightily pleased, for whatever reason. He apparently was entirely unaware that he was standing next to the bloody Dark Lord—or perhaps he didn’t care? He’d never struck Harry as being the Death Eater sort, but he was also older than Voldemort, surely… “Boys, this is Professor Timothy Quora, who will be taking over for Professor Burke for the rest of the year.”

Harry was quite sure he was gaping like a fish, by the bemused expression on the ‘Professor’s’ face. Severus, like Slughorn, seemed completely oblivious to anything being amiss, which was rather fortunate as he managed to formulate actual words in response. “What happened to Professor Burke?”

“We’re not entirely certain, I’m afraid. He was last spotted in Berlin, where he mailed his formal resignation… Odd man, that. But don’t you worry, Mr. Snape: Professor Quora is quite a competent teacher, and will have no trouble at all keeping you on track for your NEWTs. One of the best private tutors in the country, in fact! Oh, but Tim, you wouldn’t know—our Mr. Harrigan was tutored before coming here himself.”

“Was he?” the man asked, his steely gaze drifting across Harry’s face. “Perhaps I know your tutor.”

Harry flinched, eyes dropping to study the embroidery around ‘Quora’s’ throat. He could, for some reason, hear a nondescript voice ringing in his ear, urging: *Occlumency, Harry!* “I, um, doubt it, sir,” he said, as smoothly as he could muster. “The Professor was part of a, um, coven. And was very private. Sir.”

“Well, he certainly taught Mr. Harrigan very well,” Slughorn carried on conversationally, oblivious to Harry’s discomfort. “He received top marks on his Defense OWLs, after all. Oh, but don’t forget about our Mr. Snape, here! Hogwarts has never seen such an inventive brewer—does things that even *I* would never consider.”

‘Quora’s’ finally looked away, and Harry let out the slightest of breaths. “Indeed?”

Severus was uncomfortable at the praise, at least. Oh, he had an appropriately high opinion of his own skills, but he took compliments poorly, his sallow cheeks reddening with a splotchy blush and words getting trapped on his flustered tongue. Imagine that he knew—

Why hadn’t Harry grabbed him and run? Shouted the moment he recognized that Voldemort, bloody Voldemort was in Hogwarts? But no, he absolutely couldn’t do that; whether or not anyone believed him, shouting like a lunatic and trying to convince everyone that this very unassuming man was a Dark Lord would at best a way to get him locked up in St. Mungo’s, at worst the quickest route to get him and everyone else killed.

“—Mr. Harrigan?”

Harry blinked, finding Slughorn looking at him expectantly. “Sorry, Professor,” he said quickly. “I, um, missed that.”

“Are you absolutely certain this is the best Hogwarts has to offer, Horace?” ‘Quora’ drawled, looking bored. “I need an assistant, not a daydreamer.”
“It is the first, Tim,” Slughorn said cheerfully. “Up late watching Filius’s show, were you, Harry?”

Wait, did he say ‘assistant’? Oh, hell no…

Harry took a deep breath through his nose and tucked every thought he could behind a placid smile. “Oh, yes, sir,” he said. He couldn’t quite muster up a bright tone, but he supposed his half-hearted attempt would make him look even more dim-witted, and for the moment that was a good thing. “They were really quite amazing, weren’t they? I’ve never seen fireworks like that.”

“Fireworks?” ‘Quora’ echoed, an eyebrow raising as he regarded Harry with increasing coldness. “At Hogwarts? One would think a young man of your reputed promise would be off making the most of the holiday, not sitting around the castle waiting on fireworks.”

The blood draining out of Harry’s face was leaving him feeling rather dizzy. He was going to die. Or at least suffer. Not nine hours ago he’d been celebrating managing to avoid Voldemort’s grasp and now here he was, wallowing in the aftermath of his petty lies…

“Re—reputed promise? S—sir?” he managed to stammer out. “I don’t—”

But Slughorn laughed and through his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Well, our Harry here isn’t one for networking, I’m afraid,” he said. “Haven’t been to a single one of my parties, have you Harrigan? Despite several invitations…”

“Er, no sir,” Harry managed. Slughorn had invited him after he’d applied to the OMRL, but he’d heard about it from Hector first and luckily managed to avoid the invitation with claims of studying. The students called it the ‘Slug Club’, and apparently a select few sat around eating candied pineapple and networking with Slughorn’s various famous connections, and it sounded absolutely horrible. Lily was a member, too, and had encouraged him to come… but he’d always managed to find an excuse.

“He’s not much one for crowds,” Severus offered in Harry’s defense, though his voice peculiarly pitched. “Prefers libraries to parties.”

“And you think he will be an appropriate assistant? Really, Horace…”

“Don’t underestimate him,” Slughorn said. Harry wasn’t sure where he’d earned this vigorous defense; all Harry had ever done was mention he was bad at potions and reject his social invitations. “As I said, Harry had the top OWL score in Defense, and earned outstandings in Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions, of course, and an E in Herbology. I’ve no doubt that had he been here his fourth year, he would have been made prefect as well.”

“OWL scores do not a good teacher make,” ’Quora’ said flatly.

“Teacher?” Harry squeaked. “You— he wants me to—”

“Assistant Teacher, Harry,” Slughorn said soothingly. “Or, Teaching Assistant, I think the title is.”

“He is a good tutor,” Severus offered. Harry shot him a pleading look. Ignored, of course. “He’s helped Regulus numerous times, and he has that revision group, you know.”

Slughorn nodded sagely, but Harry quickly shook his head. “I—I’m really very sorry, Professors, but I can’t possibly—there’s NEWTs to study for, and all that, and I’m still doing work for the OMRL, and I really don’t have time—”

“The ‘omeril’?” ‘Quora’ echoed, tone suddenly curious.
Damn, he was a good actor. Voldemort probably knew the exact address of the flat he had stayed in at the OMRL, but ‘Quora’...

“Oh, yes, Harry here got a research scholarship last summer—at the Oxford Library, very competitive, you know—and has been translating documents for them ever since! He’s even allowed to take materials out, and you know how they are about removing things from the library…”

“Copies, sir,” Harry corrected weakly. He’d only translated one document since he’d been back at Hogwarts, but Slughorn was making it sound like some sort of full-time job. “And just enough to earn a bit of savings, sir, I really can’t take on more than that… Not on top of NEWTs.”

“I am looking for an assistant to smooth the transition between Mr. Burke’s tenure and my own, Mr. Harrigan,” ‘Quora’ said gravely. “I require a NEWT student, one who has completed the work of the earlier years, and the seventh years are far busier than any sixth year, or so Horace informs me. The additional work would be no more than that of an additional class, with additional hours on weekends, and you would be paid.”

“Really, sir, I can’t possibly—”

Severus cut Harry off. “How much?” he asked sharply. “I’m sure Harry could cut down on his work for the Library, if he were being paid enough.”

‘Quora’ glanced over to Slughorn. “Well, the same as I pay the two of you for your fine potions work,” Slughorn said amiably. “Seven sickles per hour. It’s the standard student wage, you know.”

“And what, ten hours a week?”

“Approximately,” ‘Quora’ agreed. “More if he’s amenable.”

“I’m not—”

“He’ll do it,” Severus said authoritatively.

“Hold on a minute—”

“It is rather more than a student would earn elsewhere,” Slughorn agreed. "Enough to see you through next summer, no doubt. And we all know that you are no stranger to hard work, Harry. Why, Clarke about had kittens when you brought her your special project!”

"Special project?"

"Oh, yes. Harry's had his OWL waived for Ancient Runes, you know. After only one year of study, he's already caught up with his peers. Really quite remarkable."

"Not quite caught up, sir," Harry protested. "Actually, I've got a whole bunch of extra work to do, to get caught up with the rest of the sixth years. I'd like to take it as a NEWT, but I may have to drop a class in order to keep up with the workload. Anything more and I think I may burst."

"Nonsense," said Quora. "You are taking how many subjects the NEWT level?"

"Um. Six, now."

"There is absolutely no reason for a six-course workload to hold you back from extra-curricular activities. Those are, after all, what distinguish job applications, when you do apply. NEWT students are a knut a dozen these days, after all. I do assume you intend to work?"
Harry stared at Quora in dismay. He had hoped the disparaging comments meant he didn't want Harry on as an assistant any more than Harry did, but it seemed that was not the case. "Of course, sir..."

"Then there is no reason for you not to start right away. You will need all the help I can provide, it appears."

"Excellent!" Slughorn exclaimed. "Then it is settled; Harry shall be your assistant, Tim. Albus did give you the paperwork already?"

"Professors, really—"

"Yes; he delivered it while I was unpacking my, ah, office, this morning. It is in my desk."

"—I really can’t—"

"You had better sit down and go over it before the rest of the students return. I dare say you will be quite busy tomorrow."

"—as will I, with—"

"From what I’ve seen of Mr. Burke’s notes, busy doesn’t even begin to cover it," Quora said dryly. "It seems as though these children have not had an OWL-worthy, let alone NEWT-worthy education to speak of. Perhaps Mr. Harrigan can inform me the secret of his apparent success."

"Lots of revising, and devoting all my time to it," Harry said, not even caring if his voice sounded frosty. "Which I really can’t afford to give up—"

He was cut off by Severus’s elbow connecting sharply with his ribs. "Don’t be an idiot, Harrigan," Severus hissed. As their eyes met, Harry could only hope that Severus could see the thoughts pleading for help in his eyes—no, it seemed not. "You can have Harrigan now, Professor, to sign those papers—I assume there’s something he will need to sign? Our plans won’t mind the delay."

"Excellent," Slughorn said again.

"Very well," said Quora, turning and leading the way through the doors of the Great Hall with the arrogant confidence of one who could not imagine he would not be followed. Slughorn, of course, fell right in step, the grip he had around Harry’s shoulder bringing him along. Harry shot one last pleading look at Severus, but the other boy just smiled in a peculiar way and turned to head up the side steps, to the library, no doubt.

"Now, Tim," Slughorn called coaxingly, which was enough for the man to slow down to a pace more acceptable to the rotund Potion’s Master, just as Harry was thinking he might be able to speed up and get out of Slughorn’s grip (it was rather awkward to walk with with arm around his shoulders). "I believe Harry here has at least one free period every day—isn’t that right, Harry?"

"Not really, sir, I usually use them for homework…"

Slughorn chuckled. "Well, m’boy, you may be a Ravenclaw but I’d dare say you need some more excitement in your life! I was going to say, Tim, you might consider having him help with the first and second years. I’m led to believe Burke wouldn’t let them at their wands at all, and I dare say a more practical approach might encourage them to improve those grades. Really, I had letters from seven households over the holidays; I dare say the children have had a spot of luck to get your help…"
Salt to the wound, that—Slughorn wanted him in a room of first years? First years attempting spells? Harry avoided them at all costs, and even if the null ward hadn’t been failing the last few days he wouldn’t have risked stressing it…

“We will have to take a look at his schedule,” Quora drawled, sounding like he was unenthused as Harry was. “However, it’s the older classes that I may need an extra set of eyes in. They’re more likely to be doing anything practical, after all, and I dare say that twenty half-trained students all trying to cast at once—I don’t envy your position, Horace.”

“Oh, but you are spoiled with your tutoring. One-on-one, was it?”

“Usually. Or a small group—never more than four.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Slughorn said. Harry caught a glance of Quora’s expression, his lip curled up and nostrils flared like he’d smelled something foul—insulted that Slughorn had even suggested he would have trouble? But his face smoothened quickly, and then they came on the grand stairs, and Slughorn made his excuses to slip away. Quora gave a tight smile as the Potions Master promised to bring something or another to the dinner table—and then he was gone, leaving Harry standing alone with Voldemort at the foot of the stairs. The man gave him a cool look.

“Sir,” Harry began. “I really don’t think—”

“That much is clear,” said Quora, sounding bored, though his gaze didn’t budge an inch until Harry swallowed. And then it was only the faintest shift, not even a proper smirk. “I do loath dawdlers. Lead the way, Mr. Harrigan, unless I get us lost on all these stairs,” he drawled, and Harry had no choice but to obey.

As he climbed to the third floor and turned them down the appropriate hall, Harry’s mind was racing. He’d made plans, all sorts of plans, in the many nights he’d been kept awake by Hogwart’s lively magic. Plans for if he were captured and found out, which had mainly involved trying to escape or purposely botching an *obfuscus* on himself and hoping that Dumbledore or St Mungo’s would be able to work things out if he got through it. Plans for that summer, if he didn’t convince Voldemort of his absolute neutrality through his letters, to slip into the muggle world, or to go to Dumbledore. Plans to run, to change his identity, to get as far away as he could—the US, maybe, if he could afford a portkey to New York and seek asylum there. But none of them had accounted for this! Voldemort at Hogwarts? What was he supposed to do?

At last, they came to the Defense classroom. The Professor’s office was at the far side, through a narrow door. Harry shuddered as they grew closer and the null ward began to slip—Quora had done *something* to his magic and it was less overwhelming, but Harry could feel the room blanketed by wards blocking everything inside from his senses, wards he knew hadn’t been there before the holidays, wards which were elegant, certainly, but powerful. More powerful than the null ward could pass through, he feared, though it snapped shut again, but he felt ‘Quora’s’ hand ghosting close to his back to guide him forward and lurched away from it, the wards the lesser evil to the man’s touch—

—and when he stepped through, he felt the beads icy cold against his wrist, straining to keep his comforting safety net intact, but they held, thank God, they held.

He glanced around the room, finding the walls lined with bookshelves filled with all manners of tomes and trinkets. Behind him, Harry heard the door click shut, doing his best not to turn to follow the rustling robes and soft footsteps. “Well, Mr. Harrigan,” the man said as he came around into view, standing between Harry and a large wooden desk that sat before a wide window. “It seems you are not so entirely without sense as I had feared.”
Harry swallowed, doing his best to keep up the face he had managed before Slughorn. “Sir? If you already have so low an opinion of me, I can’t help but wonder why you would go along with the suggestion to make me your Teaching Assistant? Come to think of it—where have you heard of me, beyond Slughorn? I’ve certainly never seen you before…”

The man chuckled, such a normal sound that it made Harry’s skin crawl, especially when paired with the stillness settled around those far-too-ordinary blue-grey eyes. “Do not play me for a fool, Mr. Harrigan. Or shall I call you Harry, like your friends do?”

“Oh… that seems rather forward, sir. We’ve only just met, and…”

The smile that crossed the man’s face could have shattered glass with its coldness. “Your persistent denial is one of your less endearing qualities, Mr. Harrigan,” he said blandly. “And you have already proven your ability to hold your tongue, so if that is what you are hoping to prove, cease. Although…” His eyes narrowed, leaning towards Harry to peer into his eyes—_occlumency_, Harry!—and his voice dropped to a murmur. “I find myself curious as to how you made the observation that you have, so quickly. And you know the lengths I will go to, in order to satisfy my curiosity.”

It was a strange thing, to find the logical part of his mind hissing that the man couldn’t possibly think to harm a student known to be alone in his presence, while the irrational portion was screaming _of course he would—this is Voldemort—run!_ Normally their roles were reversed. But Harry, feeling a bead of cold sweat running down the back of his neck, could hardly blame for listening neither to them nor the warning so clear in Voldemort’s voice and words. After all, the analysis was correct: Harry was incapable of knowing when to stop, and it was _dangerously_ unendearing.

So, it was only in his nature to stammer, “Ob—b—ervation, sir?”

That indistinguishable voice in his head again (_occlumency!_) was all the warning Harry got before the world vanished before his eyes.

When he came to (or, rather, when his brain remembered that the signals coming from his eyes were meant to be interpreted, not overruled by a sense he was not even supposed to have), it took Harry several minutes to realize that there was a man who was Voldemort standing at that thing which was a desk stretching up above him, examining something leaking magic but out of visible sight, and then he lost himself for a moment because there was magic everywhere—not his, _his_ was contained again (thank Merlin), but books and trinkets and spells and so many layers of wards—and when his mind finally remembered that it had dealt with this for the last year—the wards around the room weren’t _that_ strong—he saw again just in time to register the eyes on him, the mouth moving, the arm raised and surging with magic in time for a—

Harry jumped out of the way of the spell. Or, he would have, had he been standing, but he had sunk to the ground at some point and his movement did little more than topple him over. He managed to dodge the spell, though, his mind following it as it hit the ward wrapping in front of the bookcases and disintegrated into the web, sending ripples of magic through the walls. But when a tight grip yanked him upright by an arm threatened to dislocate at the shoulder, knowing a spell was coming did little to get him out of the way. Voldemort, disguised face far too close for any self-preserving person to be comfortable with, frowned as the magic washed through Harry without finding purchase. He opened his mouth to voice some demand, and that was when Harry realized—
“I can’t hear you,” he said numbly. Or, he tried to say. He couldn’t know, not when his brain had restored every sense but sound and that didn’t seem to be changing, the silence cloying and isolating stopping every sound in a way the ward had never stopped the magic—

Whatever he managed to say, it made Voldemort’s frown deepen, and his cold hand to grab at Harry’s chin, tilting his face to look directly into his eyes—

Harry, bless him, had the presence of mind to occlude, throwing up every defense he knew as he felt the foreign presence slip into his mind—and the direct contact of magic sinking into his skin—

But if felt strangely welcome. This was not Severus fumbling against his walls, this was a slippery presence, like a stray thought weaving through the surface of his mind, as though it belonged there, not something alien but just a different aspect of his usual self. It did not even try to push against his barriers, just fluttered about easily as if it had been born there, and a voice, clear as day, echoed about—

How curious.

The sound echoed around in his head for a moment, strangely knocking against the silence, as Harry forced back the memory of Ollivander (How curious… how very curious…— he couldn’t remember what had been curious) and drowned it behind the walls. And then Harry could feel Voldemort raise his wand—pause—summon the magic for a spell—pause—again, and then it settled into his ears, pushing in—

Music. He could hear music. Harry couldn’t name any composers, especially now, but it was a full symphony, strings and drums and brass all swelling into a grand crescendo, in time with the blood pounding in his ears, and—

It stopped before the resolution. The spell ended, leaving Harry reeling from the absence of the pressure. Voldemort let go of his arm and his mind at the same time. Harry could hear his heart pounding, breathing heavy against the quiet of the room. He could hear.

“Tchaikovsky, Mr. Harrigan,” said Voldemort, turning to return to the far side of the desk, though distance did not hide his bright-eyed, hungry fascination.

“What?” Harry managed to rasp out. His throat felt like he had been physically strangled… as did the rest of him, knees wobbling and threatening to deposit him back on the floor. Voldemort, seeing this, flicked his wand to summon a single wooden chair, ornate in design and uncomfortable in structure, so opposite to those summoned by Dumbledore that Harry might have laughed if he weren’t flinching against the clap of magic.

“Sit,” the man said simply. It was all Harry could do to obey. “Tchaikovsky was the composer of the song. You were wondering about it rather loudly, for someone attempting to hide behind occlumency. Still, your attempts are admirable, for a boy of your disposition—excuse me. Young man.”

Harry just blinked, his thoughts coming slow, looking very carefully at the spot over the man’s left shoulder, so as not to meet Voldemort’s eyes. For a moment, it seemed like Voldemort was going to be angry at his lack of proper response, and Harry clambered for words, but the man just smirked and looked back down at his desk.

Harry’s left hand flew to his right wrist, seeing what the man was studying. He winced in pain: the beads of his ward had burned cold against his skin as they shattered, leaving him with tender marks and angry red scratches. Vaguely, he was aware that he should be alarmed that he had not made
sense of it already—he had barely processed that Voldemort’s magic was once again as tightly constrained as Severus’s, and that should have been a more important fact in his mind—but mostly he was consumed by a wave of raw anger like hadn’t felt since… since… he couldn’t even remember.

“You broke my ward!” he cried, even as he slumped against the seat in exhaustion. “You know how much time that took me?”

“I had been wondering why on earth someone would make something like this,” Voldemort mused. “Most people seek ways to amplify their perception of magic, not dull it, and this is far too brittle to block any attacks. But…” He looked over at Harry thoughtfully. “You know, Mr. Harrigan, when I considered pressing you for your secrets, I never thought it would be this easy to uncover.”

Occlumency, occlumency, occlumency—Voldemort must be chief on the list of those who shouldn’t find out about Harry’s other secrets, so he tucked them away in the depths of his occlumency until it was just him and Voldemort and that enveloping anger. The magic sensing was supposed to be a secret too, after all, one that, if Severus’s reaction was anything to go by, Voldemort would find more useful as a tool than Harry particularly liked to consider.

“You know, Professor,” he bit out. “If I had considered for a moment that you would attempt something as ridiculous as disguising yourself to get into Hogwarts, I would have expected your disguise to not be so bloody obvious.”

Voldemort chuckled again, and turned his attention back to levitating the string of broken beads. Harry struggled not to give into the anxiety one naturally feels when violently dark wizards start using magic, even if it was just levitation. He could feel how laughably small the spell was for the man.

“Most people, Mr. Harrigan, see only what they wish to see. You seem to have the rather unique problem of seeing too much.” He prodded one of the beads—one marked with ansuz, Harry could feel that, even cloven as it was—and Harry shuddered as the ward flared with magic, trying and failing to complete its purpose. “Still, to go to this extreme… where did you get the idea?”

Harry licked his lips, and it took all of his effort to answer truthfully, knowing what Severus would say, knowing how easy it would be to ask Professor Notaro. “St. Mungos has a… they call it the Null Room.”

“Oh?” said Voldemort. He reached up with one hand, and with a burst of magic a book came flying from the shelf to his hand, flipping open before it connected, and Voldemort studied it for a moment. “Ah. Uncontrolled magemetry. A corruption from Greek, mageia and metres, in English the common suffix -metry. Known to end in insanity, either from the condition itself or the isolation of the Null Room. Charming.”

“I’m not going insane.”

“No? Interesting.” He set the book down on the desk before Harry could get a look at the title. “You perceive, at any given time, aspects of the world most people never will, recognize this as unnatural enough to attempt to hide it, are apparently frequented by being overwhelmed to the point of—dare I call it catatonia? And yet you seem free of questions as to whether or not what you are perceiving is real. If you’re not going, then perhaps ‘gone’ would be the appropriate term.”

“No less sane than you are,” Harry muttered, and promptly bit down on his tongue, willing it to stay in place. Voldemort, luckily, seemed only vaguely amused by the comment.
“And your argument there would be...?”

Harry, forgetting that he should be avoiding Voldemort’s eyes, glanced up in surprise. Was Voldemort really asking him why he thought Voldemort was insane?

“Yes,” was the unwanted answer to his unspoken question, and Harry scowled, looking away again.

“You noticed the shell of a scar just by walking past,” he muttered darkly. “Which no one else has even realized exists. And you’re a self-proclaimed Dark Lord.”

“Not self-proclaimed, but I suppose I see your point.”

The man sat down in his neglected desk chair, and finally let the remnants of Harry’s ward drop back onto the desk, only to jab at it with his wand and set it alight with a burst of fire that hurt Harry’s senses—he hadn’t realized it was possible to hurt like that—but he started up. “Hey!”

“It is entirely useless at this point, Mr. Harrigan,” Voldemort said blandly, cutting off the flames and sweeping the remaining ashes of the table and into nothingness with another flick of his wand. Harry gnashed his teeth.

“I could have fixed it!”

“I doubt it. And even if you had, earth is not your element.”

“What?”

“Earth. Clay, Mr. Harrigan? An unsuiting choice, if the magic you are trying to contain is your own.” Harry opened his mouth to argue, but he wasn’t sure what he was arguing against. And Notaro had been surprised he had used clay... Voldemort looked at him, the amusement and professed patience sliding off his face. “Sit down, Mr. Harrigan. Surely you know your magical theory? Or do they not teach you such things these days?”

Harry sat. “Clay is easy to carve, and once it hardens it holds its form,” he said stiffly. “Ideal for marking with runes.”

“But you and your magic do not carry those traits. No, I would say...” He tilted his head slightly, and then his magic burst forth, rushing at Harry—not all of it, but enough to make Harry give an undignified squeak and try to jump back out of the way, only to topple the chair and sprawl across the floor again. Voldemort frowned and waved his hand—not even bothering with his wand!—and Harry was lifted, the chair righted, and both set back into place as they had been the moment before—all by the tendrils of his magic that turned Harry’s skin to gooseflesh... but restrained as it was, Harry couldn’t help but lean into it, even as it chased the breath out of lungs and he grew dizzy and —

“Air, apparently,” said Voldemort, and the magic rushed back into him, back into the iron-clad trap that his physical body had become. “Curious. I would have expected fire, but then again, they are tied to one another.”

“Right,” said Harry, trying to hopelessly hide his sudden breathlessness. “Let me just go carve some beads out a cloud, and—”

“That would be water, Mr. Harrigan. Do use that willful mind of yours.” The Dark Lord leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest and managing to look somewhat regal, even with the slightly balding head of his assumed appearance. “Besides,” he said eventually. “You are of more use to me when you are not blocking it.”
“Of more use to…” Harry felt trapped between shrinking into himself and bristling up to shout his disgust at the prospect and did his best to stay very, very still. This was what occlumency was useful for, after all.

“Don’t tell me you really are so naïve as to truly believe you are not a tool to my intentions? Perhaps I regarded the abysmal judgment you so readily displayed in our correspondence too harshly, and you really are a fool.”

“I am not a tool!”

“But you do not deny being a fool, and as you are a fool, you cannot hope to distinguish on your own whether or not you are a tool. I, neither fool nor tool, declare you both, though as my tool you had best learn to be less of a fool.”

The self-contented smile returned briefly, as if he delighted in spinning Harry’s head in circles. He probably did, the bastard, though that didn’t seem particularly Dark Lord-ly. None of this did, really —

But then Voldemort’s face returned to that cold expression he wore so expertly, and though it wasn’t the face as he’d seen on Halloween, it was still a look that chilled Harry to the bone. “But you are not so much a fool as you pretend to be, are you, Mr. Harrigan,” he said gravely. “And you know that the game had to come to an end, no matter how desperately you avoided it.”

Harry winced before he could stop himself, the poorly occluded fear stirring molten in his gut. Voldemort hadn’t brought up his refusal to attend the New Year’s Eve party, but it was clear that he would punish disobedience, even when Harry never had any obligations to him. “There was no game,” Harry said. “I mean it, no matter how many times I will have to explain it: I am staying neutral in this… this war of yours, and you—”

“You haven’t been neutral since the moment you set foot in Malfoy Manor. I believe—what is the phrase? You’re either with us, or against us. Yes, that is the one.” He uncrossed his arms, bringing his elbows out to rest on his chair, and laced his fingers together, a motion that Harry watched carefully, searching for anything suspicious, any hint of magic moving under his tight hold. There wasn’t any. “And it would be a waste for you to die. I have been so patient with you so far, after all,” Voldemort went on smoothly. “You owe me your allegiance.”

“I don’t owe you anything! I don’t even have to be your bloody teaching assistant.”

“Oh, but you are wrong on both accounts, Mr. Harrigan. Though perhaps I should choose someone else? Behind you in your class, there is… oh, there’s Lily Evans, that mudblood in your little study group with a penchant for—how did you put it? Emasculating hexes. There’s your minder, Mr. Snape, though I dare say my patience for him is rather less than dear Lucius’s. Or Remus Lupin—a werewolf, of all things. I haven’t heard of any love between you and him, but you do seem to have a peculiar fondness for animals. Lucky for you, the headmaster always did have trouble keeping monsters out of the school.”

Harry swallowed past the somewhat alarming revelation that Lupin of all people was a werewolf, instead unsettled by his comment about Dumbledore… Here was Voldemort, right under the man’s nose! Wasn’t he supposed to be leading the resistance?

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“You haven’t been neutral since the moment you set foot in Malfoy Manor. I believe—what is the phrase? You’re either with us, or against us. Yes, that is the one.” He uncrossed his arms, bringing his elbows out to rest on his chair, and laced his fingers together, a motion that Harry watched carefully, searching for anything suspicious, any hint of magic moving under his tight hold. There wasn’t any. “And it would be a waste for you to die. I have been so patient with you so far, after all,” Voldemort went on smoothly. “You owe me your allegiance.”

“I don’t owe you anything! I don’t even have to be your bloody teaching assistant.”

“Oh, but you are wrong on both accounts, Mr. Harrigan. Though perhaps I should choose someone else? Behind you in your class, there is… oh, there’s Lily Evans, that mudblood in your little study group with a penchant for—how did you put it? Emasculating hexes. There’s your minder, Mr. Snape, though I dare say my patience for him is rather less than dear Lucius’s. Or Remus Lupin—a werewolf, of all things. I haven’t heard of any love between you and him, but you do seem to have a peculiar fondness for animals. Lucky for you, the headmaster always did have trouble keeping monsters out of the school.”

Harry swallowed past the somewhat alarming revelation that Lupin of all people was a werewolf, instead unsettled by his comment about Dumbledore… Here was Voldemort, right under the man’s nose! Wasn’t he supposed to be leading the resistance?

“Lucky for you,” Harry managed to grind out. “Or you wouldn’t have gotten through the door.”

A cold chuckle filled the space between them. “So, which will it be, Mr. Harrigan? I could perhaps choose Hector Smithe, since he so loves organizing his groups. Your revision group, the gobstone
Harry ground his teeth. He wasn’t sure which ‘alternative’ was worse. “I will be the TA—but that’s all I’m agreeing to. You can stick your ideas of—”

“You think we care whether or not you agree or not? No matter. You’ll need to sign this,” Voldemort said, vaguely waving a hand at the desk to withdraw series of official-looking documents, which joined a quill in floating over to Harry. Harry winced. Even restrained as Voldemort’s magic was, without the ward’s interference he found it difficult to detach his attention from the power and control it took for even such simple wandless magic. All he’d done—every bit of it, he realized—was levitation of some sort, but it didn’t feel like a first-year spell when he used it like that.

“What is it?” Harry asked, peering down at the parchment but having trouble actually reading the words as it bobbed. There was definitely magic bound to the ink, and he had no intention to just grab a magical object coming at him from Voldemort.

“A confidentiality agreement. Well, your entire contract as an employee of Hogwarts, but I am not altogether concerned beyond the confidentiality bits.” Despite his bored tone, there was something in Voldemort’s face suggesting smugness—and Harry wasn’t going to meet his eyes, damn it.

“Standard fare for teaching staff. As a teaching assistant, you will be coming into contact with so-called confidential information. Dumbledore does so insist on preserving his students’ privacy.”

“Dumbledore wrote this?” Harry asked. Somehow, the thought that Voldemort would be having him sign one of Dumbledore’s contracts was even more suspicious than being told to sign one of his own.

“Most of it,” said Voldemort, picking up the book off his desk again. “There were some addendums, of course. Page eight. Which will not make it upstairs to the Headmaster’s office, I’m afraid.”

Harry frowned and grabbed the pages, resisting the urge to flip directly forward. He wasn’t entirely stupid, after all: showing that he trusted Dumbledore enough to sign a binding contract without reading it over would be a blatant display of non-neutrality, and really… it was Dumbledore. Largely, the first few pages described the duties of a Teaching Assistant, which was, in essence, anything the professor asked of them. Mostly, however, the clauses following that were strangely specific—The Employee agrees to never knowingly expose students to noxious materials illicitly obtained from magical megafauna (see Ministry of Magic Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures’ Guidelines of Creature Classifications, table 16) without being within a thirty meter proximity to a bezoar or known antidote, excepting circumstances detailed in school rule addendum Ansuz-31-c or the wisdom of the Headmaster—but after those, beginning on page seven, was a list that Harry found simultaneously relieving and alarming, which was to say: the confidentiality agreements.

On the one hand, it was something of a relief to know that even if any of the professors did discover his circumstances, they wouldn’t be able to expose him without the permission of the Headmaster, as Harry’s secrets would no doubt be considered life-altering or threatening. Nor, apparently, were any of them allowed to consult with the press about a student without the student’s or the headmaster’s permission, nor the rest of the student body. On the other hand, there were a number of loopholes to be found in the phrasing, and where loopholes were closed they were bound to the Headmaster’s absolute authority.

Frankly, it seemed Dumbledore’s authority was the be-all and end-all of the contract, which wouldn’t
be so alarming—except that clauses such as ‘The Employee agrees that under no circumstances will they attempt to make known any infraction which may result in penalty under law to parties outside the school of another Employee of Hogwarts School without prior permission of the Headmaster or the accused party’ gave Dumbledore the power to force his staff to withhold information from the law. So even if another teacher discovered that this ‘Quora’ was actually Voldemort they couldn’t report him to the ministry without going through Dumbledore. Not that Harry thought Dumbledore would stop anyone in that particular case—it just seemed like an awful amount of power for one man to hold.

Finally, he reached page eight, and his focus narrowed as he read Voldemort’s additions.

The “employee” henceforth referred to as the “signee” agrees to abide by the following superseding terms:

One: The signee shall preserve any and all secrets of the party who acts as their direct supervisor (named by signature at the end of this contract). In the instance of becoming known to the signee, a secret shall thereafter only be revealed at the discretion of that supervisor, and may not otherwise be shared in speech or thought, save to those already aware of the secret in its entirety.

Two: The signee shall agree to the magics necessary to the preservation of the secrets of their supervisor, which shall be determined and performed at the supervisor’s discretion, with or without the signee’s prior knowledge.

Three: The signee shall not submit any evidence or testimony beyond their supervisor’s discretion to any party save those already aware of them in their entirety.

Four: The signee shall not disclose to any party any action performed by the supervisor or signee outside the bounds of those actions previously described in the contract as the standard duties of the signee and those duties likewise prescribed as standard in the supervisor’s own contract, except by the supervisor’s discretion.

Five: The signee shall disregard all clauses listed within the contract which would bind the signee to the Headmaster before the supervisor, as they shall disregard any clauses which contradict the superseding terms.

Six: The signee shall not make known to any party these superseding terms, nor discuss them with any party not already aware of them, except by the discretion of the supervisor.

Seven: The signee agrees to be bound to these terms in a gaes, which shall last until the supervisor officially releases the signee, or the immutable death of either party.

Harry’s frown deepened as he read each term, and when he reached the end, he went up to the top and read it again. He was aware of the long fingers drumming along the edge of the desk, and that he was tempting fate by taking the time to read through rather than just signing immediately as Voldemort wanted.

Finally, he worked up the courage to trust his voice to say only what he meant to, and asked, “What is a… ‘gaes’?”

He felt Voldemort’s scrutiny upon him, but did not look up, even as he pushed everything out of his mind but the contract and his question and waited for an answer. “A binding magic,” the man said at
last. “If the conditions to share information are not met, you will find yourself incapable of speaking or thinking what you might have shared.”

Like the fidelus, then, Harry thought—though at the same time, quite different. He supposed he didn’t really know enough about the magic behind either to compare them, especially since when he tried to remember what he knew about the fidelus, he found only the vaguest idea followed by a gaping lot of nothingness. He supposed that anything serious enough to seal with the fidelus would have been serious enough to seal away with his memories, and that it was for the best… and then he occluded that thought, too.

“I expect you are familiar with the concept,” Voldemort went on blandly, startling Harry out of his consideration. He turned his thoughts back to the matter of the gaes, and realized that Voldemort was right—he had all but described being under one in his letter regarding the story with the professor and the coven he and Dumbledore had invented.

“I really couldn’t say,” Harry said carefully. Let Voldemort make of that what he wanted to. “The word is unfamiliar, though.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t have covered that sort of magic yet.” Had Harry been feeling confident about anything, he might have said Voldemort’s voice sounded disappointed, but as it was Harry wasn’t about to risk any assumptions about the man. “Have you completed your perusal? I don’t have all day to devote to your dawdling, so if you are quite finished, then sign.”

“I can’t sign this!” Harry exclaimed before he thought to stop himself.

“And why is that?”

“You—this—it practically means I can’t say a single word against you!”

“That is rather the point,” Voldemort drawled. “Though it is nothing so dramatic, really. You’ll still be able to complain about your horrible Defense professor assigning too much homework.”

“You even usurp Dumbledore’s authority as headmaster!”

“You must admit it gives him far too much.”

“But it is fine for you to have that?”

Voldemort’s lips pulled into a tight smile. “Unlike Dumbledore, I make no attempts to veil my goals, Mr. Harrigan. Which you would know if you had a lick of sense about you, but if that were the case you could be trusted to be left to your own devices. And yet, here we are.”

Harry flinched ever so slightly—he knew there was a hint to his disobedience regarding the New Year’s gathering in there. “I’ve had two months where I could have gone and made trouble for you,” he pointed out. “And I didn’t. I just want to be left alone.”

“Too bad,” Voldemort said flatly. “I grow tired of your denial of the reality of your situation, Mr. Harrigan. You are going to sign that contract.”

“And if I refuse?”

Voldemort raised an eyebrow. The face he was wearing, sharp-featured as it was, was the perfect canvas for his expression of unamused disbelief. “Well, considering you already agreed to the job and signing the contract is part of that I shouldn’t think it necessary, but of course there is an alternative. I imperius you, obliviate you, order you to sign the contract, obliviate you again, and
send you on your way to discover the bounds of the contract you will not know you signed on your own. Oh, and remove the Imperius, if I’m feeling charitable at that point, which I can assure you: I will not be.” Harry’s scowl deepened, and Voldemort laughed. “Mr. Harrigan. Do you really think there is a single version of this scenario where you leave this room able to talk?”

So easily he declared he would jump to the Unforgivables! Harry was tempted, sorely tempted to refuse. He knew he could defeat the Imperius—it was only the vaguest memory, the sensation of being under its comforting touch and saying no, but somehow he felt confident that he could. Against Voldemort, though? The bastard had so much magic Harry couldn’t imagine fighting him off… and yet still his instincts said yes, he could.

But he also knew he hadn’t always been susceptible to being overwhelmed by magic. Even if that didn’t affect his ability to fight off the curse, it rendered him helpless in a completely different way, and the combination… Besides, who was to say Voldemort didn’t have other means of controlling people, means that Harry had not learned how to fight? If he knew Harry could fight the imperius, he would know to try something else first in the future. If he could just keep that little bit of power to himself…

And there was nothing in the contract that said he could not run.

“You planned on this,” Harry said bitterly. “You… you made Slughorn think you were against me, but it was your goal all along.”

“I’ll admit Horace hurried my plans along for me. I had intended to wait and draw you out in class. Of course, you would already know about this,” and at that Voldemort’s voice fell back into coldness. “Had you not been so insistent on remaining out of reach last night. For fireworks, Mr. Harrigan? Hardly a pressing commitment.”

He was making fun of Harry, perhaps, but his ire was clearly real. Were Harry better equipped to deal with Dark Lords, he would either have been prepared right away with a sharp retort, or would have had better sense than to keep his mouth shut. “I didn’t even know about the fireworks. My commitments were… with others.”

“Really? I am almost curious to ask who you might hold in higher priority than Lord Voldemort.”

Harry bit his lip. On the one hand, it would be so satisfying to bruise Voldemort’s by telling him he’d been stood up for house elves. On the other, he was not going to put Hani—or any of the elves—in that sort of danger. This time, at least, Harry managed silence.

“I think I would be wasting even more of my time to ask. You are infuriatingly stubborn and obviously invested in maintaining your secrets, to go to the extent to learn occlumency. Or was that the work of your ‘Professor’ as well? If so, I might suggest you need a new teacher.”

Harry froze, tightening his occlumency, but Voldemort just laughed.

“Keep your secrets, Mr. Harrigan,” he said. “For now. I doubt they have as much use for me as the one I’ve already found. Although…” He smiled, an entirely unpleasant, predatory expression. “I wonder, how far would you go, to keep them safe? Would you dare test your walls, unpolished as they are, against the skill of Lord Voldemort?”

No, was the simple answer to that. Harry may not have know what exactly he’d sealed away, but he knew he’d risked his life to hide them. And would it be worse if Voldemort discovered he was most likely from the future, or that he had intentionally buried his memories in anticipation of running into the Dark Lord? Seeing as Harry knew where the key to unlocking them again was...
Harry ground his teeth, which earned him that sickening smile again.

“I thought not. Perhaps that will motivate you to improve them, for that will be essential.”

“Essential for what?” Harry asked, mouth running off before he could catch himself.

“The gaes protects words subtly enough, but it can be rather obvious in how it hides thoughts. A master legilimens with enough time, power, and at least basic skill with logic would be able to work out what was being kept from them, and Dumbledore has all three. You will need to improve your occlumency, as I have no intent of Dumbledore becoming aware of my presence. Or breaking your mind, for that matter, as you are much less use to me as the blathering idiot that breaking it would leave you.”

He shot Harry another bored look, and while his expression didn’t really change, it seemed to convey that he wasn’t sure whether Harry unbroken would be any use to begin with. “Well then, Mr. Harrigan? If you would deign to make your, ah, choice. Free will or the imperius, that is—just sign.”

Free will my arse, Harry thought with a scowl, but he grabbed the quill and pressed the contract to his leg to sign his name in wobbly letters. With any luck, it wouldn't take his assumed name, and since he didn’t know his real name—

As soon as he lifted the quill from the ‘n’ of Harrigan he felt the magic lying dormant in the ink blaze to life, as though he had just activated a spell circle, and it rushed over him, the magic crawling rapidly up his limbs like bursts of electricity, each racing towards his head, some sinking into his skin and following his veins—and it all seemed to gather at the top of his neck, forming a band around it that started just under his chin and wrapped around like a choking hold before it all sunk in. Before it could even settle the quill and papers were summoned from his hands and were collected from the air by Quo—

No, by Quo—

Quo—

“What the hell?” Harry snarled before he could stop himself.

“That quickly?” Quo—Quo—the bastard wondered, raising an eyebrow.

“You name is—” He knew that Quora wasn’t the name of the—the asshole sitting behind the desk looking all pleased with himself—but he couldn’t—it wasn’t like the obfuscus where the information was missing; he knew what the man was and what his name really was but he couldn’t say it, couldn’t even think the word—

“You did read what you just signed—or were you just staring at it? ‘The signee shall agree to the magics necessary to the preservation of the secrets of their supervisor, which shall be determined and performed at the supervisor’s discretion, with or without the signee’s prior knowledge.’ And you even asked what a gaes was.”

“It said nothing about your name!”

“As I said, you knew about the gaes. I am not going to allow any carelessness or lack of observation of your surroundings allow you to let my identity slip.”

“But I can’t even—it’s messing with my head! I can’t even think about—”
“I think you’ll find you can think about Lord Voldemort, but not as that name relates to me.” The man flipped through the pages, separating out one—his addition, no doubt—and tapped the rest against the desk, then without picking up his wand banished them off somewhere. Up to Dumbledore’s office, perhaps—Harry couldn’t follow the magic trail very well past Quora’s wards, and it faded quickly. “I find your indignation amusing, Mr. Harrigan. You are, after all, already under one gaes, even if you didn’t know the name.”

“I—” Harry began, but then he thought if he were under a gaes he might not be able to talk about it, and gnashed his teeth instead.

“It’s only a matter of time; I should think after a few days you will forget why you object to this name at all. I imagine it would be rather tiring to do anything otherwise.”

“And it’s only a matter of time before they figure out you’re not who you say you are,” Harry shot back, trying to calm himself by focusing on that little bit of hope. “Someone is going to notice your inconsistencies. You can’t just pretend to be someone and get away with it.”

“Just pretend? It’s rather more involved than that, Mr. Harrigan. The real Timothy Quora is currently in Germany, working undercover himself. It worked out quite nicely to give him an alibi, and should the need arise he can always return and take up this position, which I would expect you to assist him with, naturally. And I have quite thoroughly vetted my own backstory and mannerisms. Legilimency has more uses than what a novice occlumens such as yourself could ever imagine, Mr. Harrigan, and it makes pretending so easy. Besides, few who attend Hogwarts would ever even have heard of me, as a private tutor…”

Why was he telling Harry this? Not that it mattered, now…

“You mean—there is actually someone named Tim Quora?” Harry said incredulously, when Quora let himself trail off.

“Is there something strange about that?”

Harry blinked. Well, it was a strange name, but there was something deeper at work here, and he couldn’t place what, and didn’t fancy another headache. “Magical names are weird,” he said instead. “Albus Dumbledore. Minerva McGonagall. Timothy Quora… it doesn’t sound like a very ‘Dark Lordly’ name. And I, uh, I wouldn’t have expected you to ever choose to go by something like ‘Tim’?”

“That is rather the intent.” The man looked a touch displeased, and Harry backtracked.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re here? Or should I expect to be kept in the dark?”

“Your ignorance would rather defeat the purpose of my revealing myself to you.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “You didn’t ‘reveal’ anything,” he said darkly. “You just showed up and I happened to be able to tell it was you.”

"Oh, of course. Pity. I was so inclined to forgetting your little bit of defiance yesterday evening," the man drawled. He tapped the rest of the pages together against the desk so that they straightened, and set them off to one side of his desk, picking up his wand again from where it sat just in front of him. "Tell me, Mr. Harrigan, how much do you know about my little group of loyal followers?"

Harry blinked.

“You mean the ‘Death Eaters’?” he asked cautiously, earning a nod. “I—not much? Only that
they’re essentially a terrorist group with no clearly stated motives and a, um, nasty love of violence and aggression probably tied to blood politics?"

Quo— *the professor* raised an eyebrow. “You truly have no sense of self-preservation, do you?” he mused.

(Harry didn’t say anything to that. If the bastard wanted to think that, then it was probably to his advantage, after all.)

“I did instruct you to come and learn about it yesterday evening. Before you were to be thrown into this position. Quite a generous allowance on my part, which you—ah, what is the muggle phrase? Spit in the face of."

Harry bristled. “I am not one of your Death Eaters!” he snarled. “*That* wasn’t in your contract and I —”

“Of course you aren’t. Not yet.” Harry’s glare was met by a steely glance. “One bit of information you *might* have been curious to learn is that all those who enter my fold join it willingly. It must be their choice. Entirely.”

Harry stared at the man. "Alright," he said slowly. "Well, then your 'not yet' should be amended 'not ever', because, as I've told you countless times, I'm—"

"If you say neutral again I may scream," Qu—Quora said blandly, and it sounded so very ridiculous a phrase coming from *him* as opposed to some posh society wife that it took Harry a minute to accept that he had really said it.

"Well, it's true," said Harry.

"By all means, carry on with your delusions. In the meantime, not being one of my followers means you are nothing more than an expendable servant." He toyed his wand about in his hands, and Harry watched it warily, even though he would feel if—when a spell came. "Understand this, Mr. Harrigan, when I tell anyone who works under me to do something, I expect it to be done. Entirely."

Harry's scowl darkened. "Well, apparently I have now legally agreed to grade homework for ten hours a week, but if you think I'm going to do anything else—"

"I do not think, I know." Quora stood up out of his chair, and it should have been an ordinary movement but he seemed almost to roll out of it and onto his feet, and to glide over to the window, his back to Harry, and that at least was purely *him*, and not this 'Quora' thing he was going for. "You, Mr. Harrigan, are going to assist me in a number of things in my time here. As a Ravenclaw and a relative outsider, you are afforded a position of looking into matters that others might not be allowed to. Of speaking to people that those more expected to be following my lead would not be able to approach."

"You mean you want me, what—recruiting?" Harry said in disbelief. "Or gathering information, like your letter—you have to see that I am not the person you want doing something like that."

"Oh, on the contrary, you are exactly who I intend to have fill the role. Of course, you will only be an occasional liaison. There is a reason I am here in person."

"Your overwhelming love of children?"

"Young people are the ones with potential, no matter how valiantly you model their shortcomings."

The man turned away from the window, looking back to Harry. The wand was *still* in his hands.
Harry grasped the arms of his chair even tighter. It was a miracle the wood did not splinter.

"So you're just here on a recruitment... thing?" he asked as levelly as he could, licking his lips without even noticing the nervous action. "I mean, you're stuck teaching. For half a year. That—that's not exactly..."

"Under different circumstances—or a different headmaster, I should say—I would have already been your defense teacher."

Harry’s glare broke in confusion. "You want to teach?"

Quora sighed. "You overlook what power can be found teaching in the premier wizarding school in Britain," he said. "Dumbledore knew. Did you never think it odd that the man who defeated Grindelwald works in a school?"

"He’s Dumbledore, though, not exactly take over the world material."

“No?” Quora questioned. "And how do you know that?"

Harry stared for a moment before he caught himself and looked back down at his hands. "If he wanted that, he’d just go for the Minister’s office, but he’s not. He’s not even got a spot on the Wizengamot. His family seat’s in the elect."

“So you do have some knowledge of our government. I had begun to worry.” The wand in his hand still from it’s twirling again. "You know, it is tiring to explain any of this at all. If this is to be the first lesson I teach you, I can think of something far more important for you to learn."

“I’m fine with not being taught anything, actually,” said Harry, even as he did his best to pull his scattered attention away from the wards in front of the bookcases and direct it all towards the wand as it settled into a more useful position in Quora’s hand. It wasn’t hard; like the man’s magic, the wand felt—familiar, somehow... but now wasn’t the time to worry about that. He kept talking, waiting for the magic to flare as he was afraid it would, unsure of what he would do. What could he do, against— him? “I am technically still on holiday, after all. And I’m fine with politics being a purely book matter. As I’ve said."

“Oh, I don’t think books will teach you this lesson, Mr. Harrigan. It’s so remedial I doubt anyone would bother to write it down, but you are thicker than a first year, I suppose. This is a lesson about what happens when you disobey Lord Voldemort.” Slowly, deliberately, he raised his wand, as though daring Harry to do anything but sit there waiting for him to strike. As though Harry had the power to do anything more than that, even as he felt that strangely contained magic coil in anticipation. But Quora paused for just one last addition—"A practical lesson, as dear Sluggy suggested: Crucio."

Merlin.

Had he felt pain like this before? Pain so powerful his limbs felt like the bones had been run through with electricity until they shattered, and now the shards dug into every inch of muscle, and from the other side there was a pressure against his skin, pressing, pushing his skin into the tearing bone, his eyes until his shattered skull—and it was hot, burning hot, and icy cold—

And then it was over, and he was solid and visibly untouched, heart pounding against his chest, and that was almost worse.

“I don’t think you’ll be here long at all if you cast unforgivables on the first years,” Harry rasped out, after the residual magic had stopped tearing at his and some time had passed and he’d managed to
train his eyes somewhere in Quora’s direction again, and when only three of the unfamiliar face was swaying back and forth in front of his eyes, and when he’d unclenched his hands before they squeezed through the wood.

“First year *would* be too young for a practical. Their nervous systems are a bit too delicate for that sort of magic to be learned from without permanent damage. But it should be a mandatory subject for all—of course the risk of nerve damage never truly goes away, but I suppose fifth year would do.”

“Dumbledore would escort you to Azkaban himself,” Harry mumbled, a bizarre glee filling him at the thought. He laughed, suddenly, imagining how quickly the war could be over, and Dumbledore wouldn’t even know until whatever disguise Quora was wearing wore off. The laughter scraped his back against the chair, which suddenly had unbearably sharp edges and hard planes, but he couldn’t stop. “He probably already knows,” he said between gasps for breath, his muscles all unbearably tight and every little movement knocking his bones together—the laughter wouldn’t stop. His eyes were watering, but maybe they had been before—he couldn’t stop—“He’s probably on his way down right now…”

“Dumbledore will know nothing that happens in this office that I do not wish for him to,” Quora said. “And you won’t be telling him, or anyone else, for that matter. But do carry on with your hoping; it will be that much more amusing when you come to your senses.”

“You can’t make all your students sign contracts. Someone would tell Dumbledore, if you—you— you tried anything.” Harry shuddered with another giggle, but they were slowing, giving way to breaths that sounded more like sobs. “He wouldn’t let anyone use unforgivables on kids.”

“It was all hypothetical. But that is why he will lose.” His lip curled in derision, but he spoke with unfaltering confidence. “The old fool will try to keep everything close to the chest, even knowledge of the magic he will put his people against. The Cruciatius, Imperius—those can be trained to withstand, if only he weren’t so afraid of letting any of his people get a taste for it.” He studied Harry, and his scowl seemed to lessen as Harry fought to keep down bile at another surge of aching pain—weaker than the spell dealt directly, but building on all the other aftershocks. “You should be grateful, Mr Harrigan,” he went on. “I have spared you the inevitable end of the losing side. Dumbledore would try to get you eventually if he knew what you were capable of, but he would throw you out to die without knowing what you were up against.”

“At least he would ask,” Harry countered. His voice lacked the conviction, the anger that drove him to the words, hoarse as it was—had he screamed through the Cruciatius? He didn’t know—but he spoke anyway. “He wouldn’t put anyone out there who didn’t volunteer for it, or force people to fight for him who didn’t want to be involved. He, at least, has enough common sense to understand the meaning of ‘no’. Did anyone ever teach you that one? It’s basic English, really, easier to interpret than ‘yes’, though I can’t imagine—”

Throughout his tirade, the bastard had stared at him passively, but at last he picked up his wand and, with a lazy flick, sent a spell zooming towards Harry—and though he tried, this time the spell collided before Harry toppled to the floor, striking Harry and sealing his lips shut. “I grow tired of you,” Quora said, reclining and letting the chair tilt back. Harry almost expected him to throw his feet up on the desk as well, but Quora was—Harry didn't know how old. He assumed a contemporary to Abraxas Malfoy, who was as Lucius's father most likely in his forties or fifties, maybe even older. Harry slowly set himself and his chair upright again, careful in aiming his scornful glare so as not to make eye contact, and sat rubbing at the spot on his shoulder that had first connected with the floor.

"So, while you are listening," the man went on, twirling his wand about in his hands again, "This is what is going to happen. I will be teaching here, but as I have other duties to attend to, you will be
assisting me in more menial tasks. Grading the younger years' work, for example, which I trust you will be able to handle. You will also be assisting me in my secondary task, which is to determine those who will in the future be of use to me, and do remember, Mr. Harrigan: those who are not of use to me will be entirely disposable. I suggest you find something to make your little friends have use to me, or I shall have no reason to spare them in the, how to put it—changing of the guard.”

Harry let out a huff of contempt—he would never give over any information that might make Quora value anyone like that—but was ignored. Quora reached down, not bothering to right himself from his lounge, into his desk again, and brought out another piece of parchment, this one blank. The quill Harry had used to sign the contract was still on the desk; with a wave of his wand, it pinned the parchment to the desk and scratched across it.

“Fill this out with your class times,” the man said when it was done, “And I'll work out your schedule based around that. And then: get out, unless you'd prefer to be the guinea pig for some of my newest experiments…?”

Needless to say, this time Harry was far quicker to take up the quill.

Chapter End Notes

I almost forgot to note: ToTT officially has passes 200k posted! Granted, we're still not at the halfway point, but, ya know. It's a start!
When the door shut behind Harry, he wasn't sure where his feet were taking him. Away, that was all that mattered, and soon enough his legs had hastened into a run, and all he could think about was the pressing need to find somewhere to get away from this madness, somewhere to hide— He needed— escape. He needed —

His feet and the castle obliged. He felt the magic of the Room of Requirements, raw and powerful without the null ward around his wrist, before he realized that was where he had taken himself, and for a moment the suddenly more direct touch of the castle's power broke through his frantic thoughts, and he stood before the door, tall and narrow and set in a hitherto nonexistent nook, trying and failing to wrap his mind around its complexities... The castle, perhaps out of concern or impatience or confusion or by some reasoning that could only be properly understood by quasi-sentient enchanted architecture, let the door swing open with a creak.

Like the creak of the door in the Library, that was enough to break Harry's focus once again. He jumped through, pulling the door shut behind him, and even as he stood adjusting to the dim he felt the walls sliding back into place over the door on the other side.

When the last stone settled, Harry's legs gave out, and he sunk down onto a dusty floor. His breath was coming in short bursts, and his hands were shaking, and it wasn't from the running or the January chill, and the dark spots in his vision were not just the poor lighting. His face was wet with tears and snot, and his ears seemed to ring despite the silence, and his heart was threatening to burst forth from his chest and continue its desperate run away, away—

And why not? Hogwarts was no longer safe. It had been his sanctuary—Harry had planned for the possibility of the Death Eaters getting through at some point, but never for this, for Him to be here— to have Harry so utterly at his mercy, so completely under his control—

—No, not completely. He had signed the contract, but he hadn't agreed to do anything except assistant teaching. He wasn't a Death Eater. Damn Him for suggesting that was in Harry's future—it wasn't, and it would never be; Harry was still free—for now…

Should he run? Escape while he could? Go to Dumbledore and say—what, exactly? He couldn't explain to Dumbledore why he needed to escape. Doubtless the Headmaster would insist that Hogwarts was the safest place for him to hide, and even if he helped Harry leave, he would want answers about why he had chosen now to run, about what was hunting him— And why should he help Harry anyways? He couldn't believe that Harry could be useful to the Death Eaters—little did he know...

Know what? What use was Harry to anyone? God, Harry was an idiot— Why had he dimmed his memories? That was— He could have— There might have been something to keep him safe—no. No, there wouldn't have been; there was no way Harry could have expected this, and now he was under the Dark Lord's thumb… It would have been worse if He had found...

Harry sat there, shaking and weeping, for an immeasurable stretch of time. Around him, dust seemed to hang in the air like snow, and the cold of the room stung against the wetness on his cheeks. When it grew almost unbearably painful, he scrubbed at his face, his hands still shaking but at least under
his control, at least moving in willful action, his sleeve rubbing painfully against the raw skin on his
wrist where the ward had shattered... but then he managed to process what he was seeing when he
stared at his fingers and found a blotch of ink—from the quill and the contract he had signed—he
forced his hands back down and tore his eyes away... anything, anything would be better than
remembering what he had just done..

The room, he found, was small, almost too small to be considered a room. It was even smaller than
the study room near Ravenclaw tower, only a bit wider than the door, maybe large enough to fit his
bed but with no space around, and was lit only by an arrow-slit window in one corner, filled with a
strip glass frosted with grime. In front of that window, a ledge was set into the wall, an outset block
of stone that would have been the perfect size to sit on sideways and look out, but was set with
several items Harry didn’t recognize. When he’d squinted at them long enough, never mind that he
was still crying and shaking with every breath, curiosity managed to tempt him forward.

It appeared to be some sort of shrine or altar, though the collected items were seemingly mismatched.
There was a stone carved with an ornate swirling pattern, perhaps Norse or Celtic in its weaving,
swirling lines (or perhaps neither, from some culture he didn't know), with a smooth, shallow indent
at the top. A brass bowl with sides curving in on itself and a small wooden tool, not dissimilar from a
mortar and pestle, was collecting dust, and he felt inclined to wipe it away until it shone once again.
As he rubbed it, it seemed to hum, and he pulled back for a moment, then picked up the piece of
wood. Neither it nor the bowl showed any sign of herbs or objects being ground inside, but the wood
was polished by use and had criss-crossing lines worn into the sides. When he moved to return it, the
wood caught and ran along a section of the edge of the bowl, and it sang out with a brief note that
made the hairs on his neck stand up. After a moment, he tried it again, with more intent, and though
the sound came from such a small object it nevertheless seemed to fill the room, and carried with it an
energy...

He stopped as abruptly as he had started, letting the note fade away. It had felt almost like magic,
though he of all people could say for certain it was not. What, then— The unknown loomed too
large for his curiosity to play.

This altar—yes, he definitely thought it was that—was of someone else's religion, clearly, and Harry
felt suddenly as though he was caught with his hand in the cookie jar by sounding the bowl without
knowing what he was getting into. He set the piece of wood down, careful this time not to make a
sound, and looked over the other objects. Three black candles on narrow metal stands of three
different heights, waxd melted long ago hanging down in the air, a single drop settled on the stone
beneath. A bundle of some sticks Harry was too nervous to touch for fear that they would crumble
into dust, old as they clearly were. A long strip of fading red strings woven together into a single
band which here and there had knots of varying intricacy, which Harry thought seemed rather like
Hector's prayer beads, for each of those knots were darker, as though they had been worried on and
had collected the oils of the fingers that sat there. A simple metal frame, the image it had once held
now nothing more than a dark green-grey blotch on canvas now, which reminded him, in a way, of
the darkened paintings he'd found in the recesses of Severus's mind. Another stone, this one with
three holes bored into it, a stick of what Harry thought was incense held by one. He looked for
matches, first, but it would probably have been lit by magic.

On the wall above was mounted a brass dish the size a dinner plate with an ornate frame of sorts
extending several inches off the edge. The inner part was smooth and slightly concave, and it seemed
to be a mirror, in a sense, for Harry could clearly see the shape of his own form in it, but it did not
shine enough to render details. He might have polished the dust off like he had the bowl, but he
hesitated—the echoes of the strange energy the bowl had released seemed to have gathered around
the dish, and it didn't seem appropriate for Harry to touch it.
The collection was like nothing Harry had ever seen before. He was fairly certain he’d only been to church a handful of times, and he couldn’t remember why, only that his Aunt had been loath to take him along, and that the wooden pews had been decidedly uncomfortable. He didn’t think his Aunt and Uncle had attended regularly, and he didn’t remember any religious items around the house, except a bible on the lower shelf in the front room, the one that held their scant library. Still, he was fairly certain he would have recognized at least something if this altar had anything to do with Christianity, at least C of E Christianity. Instead the items all felt… foreign to him. It wasn’t unlike when he’d first been introduced to the magical world: he was intrigued by the collection, but didn’t feel precisely like he was supposed to be here. It was a space that belonged to someone else, and he was intruding. But it clearly hadn’t been used for ages, and the castle had brought it to him as somewhere to escape and be safe and hide, so in a way… it felt like it was his, too. He was sharing a hiding place with a stranger across time. He wasn’t sure if that was comforting.

His heart rate gradually recovered to more regular pace, and his breathing evened out, and he wiped the wetness from his face and found his hands weren’t shaking as violently. He’d come here to ride out his panic, and now… The waves were easing up, and he had to sort through the wreckage of his thoughts.

When he’d decided to use the obfuscus, he had feared he would forget the urgency that had driven him to such a drastic step. He shouldn’t have worried. So maybe it wasn’t exactly the ideal situation, having his enemy constantly at his doorstep. He was feeling mightily inspired to find his way back. He hoped the OMRL would return his inquiry soon; until then he could re-read all his notes, to see if he’d missed something along the way, in the early stages—

Oh, God— Severus. He had to deal with Severus. Harry didn’t particularly want to face him, not when he’d pushed Harry into the TA position, but with Quora in the castle, Harry had to move quickly. Quora had made it sound like Harry’s occlumency was pitiable; Severus, who had only had two weeks to even try to learn anything, would not stand a chance. Harry needed to cast the obfuscus right away, and if Severus took it kicking and screaming, at least in this fight Harry had the upper hand.

Slowly, he put his hands on the edge on the altar to push himself up—and in doing so pain shot up his arm from his wrist. He winced, but stood, tugging his sleeve back, inspecting his arm. The skin was even more red than before, and splotched with paler bits that looked sallow in comparison. The most angry red patches were accompanied with raised lines against his skin—similar to the way scratches from an owl would leave raised lines, but without the actual scratch. He sighed. There would be no taking this to Madame Pomfrey, no; he wouldn’t be able to explain it.

He pushed his sleeve back down, clenching his jaw against the burn. Maybe Severus would have an idea what to do. He gave the altar one last sweeping glance, and felt like he should do something, so he gave an awkward little bow and turned on heel, hurrying out towards the loo. It was going to take a lot of cold water to wash the horror of that morning off his face.

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“Will burn cream work on an, um, ice burn?”

Severus looked up from his book, raising an eyebrow, as Harry slid into his seat across from him at their usual table. “Ice burn? What did you do?”
“I didn’t do anything. The ward broke,” Harry grunted, holding up his right arm and shaking back his sleeve again, trying and failing to avoid irritating the skin. “I’m gonna have to make a new one.”

Severus inspected it, then looked back down, turning to the end of the book in his lap. It was the medical text Harry had taken out from the restricted section. Madame Pince wasn’t in her usual seat at the desk, so Harry supposed it was alright for Severus to have it out.

“It broke?” Severus asked, licking his fingers to turn the thin vellum.

“Apparently Earth is not my element.”

“Of course not. Any half-wit could tell you that.”

“Oh, so you know what that’s supposed to mean?”

“You don’t? Well, you are an idiot,” Severus said, but he fell into explanation even as he scanned the glossary. How he could speak and read at the same time… “Roughly speaking, magic users tend to correspond with a certain element. Earth, fire, water, air.”

“Magic users’ what?”

“What?”

“You said, ‘magic users tend to correspond’… what about magic users?”

“Our entire being, I suppose. Character. Personality. Soul? It’s said the founders considered sorting by element, but Ravenclaw found that too restrictive… In any case: we correspond to an element. Alternatively, a state: solid, liquid, gas, or flux. Earth is solid—reliable, slow to action and change. And there’s Earth like dirt, rocks, minerals, or Earth like plants and growing things. You’re neither.”

For some reason, that made Harry scowl. “Then what does that make me?”

“Air,” Severus said, without hesitation. Harry frowned. Quora had guessed fire, so the automatic certainty was surprising. Severus just looked pleased with himself, like he always did when he knew something Harry did not. He went on: “There’s air like wind and flying things, and there’s air like the calm before storms, like heat on a summer’s day or chill on a winter’s eve. Omnipresence.”

“And I’m…”

“Wind, clearly. You can’t brood without your leg fidgeting, you know.”

Harry didn’t know, and he wasn’t sure why Severus would notice something like that, but if he hadn’t been fairly certain that Severus wasn’t one of Voldemort’s ‘watchers’ he would have found it suspect. Not that Voldemort would care to know about a bouncy leg, though he could probably find a way to turn even that into blackmail, damn him… but Severus was not a watcher. He pushed past the unease.

The whole elemental business sounded rather fishy to him, like some new-age hippy sort of thing, even if thinking that made Harry sound like his Uncle. He sensed magic more keenly than Severus, Quora, or Notaro ever had on a daily basis, and while Voldemort’s magic tended to burn him, it was nothing to do with fire. “And what branch of magic is this covered in?” he asked, rather sarcastically. “Divination?”

“Latent magical theory.”
“Right,” Harry scoffed. He was fairly sure they’d never talked about elements (beyond the periodic table, that was) in transfiguration, and that was the only class that dealt directly with magical theory, so Severus was referencing something didn’t study at Hogwarts. Same as his suspicious breadth of knowledge about the dark arts, Harry supposed. “And you’d know all about that.”

But Severus’s hands stilled on the page he was scanning, and he looked up with narrowed eyes. “Yes, actually. Most magical children learn something about it in their early years, if their parents have any culture, and as it happened my mother was raised by the old ways and determined to give me as much as she could. You didn’t even know what the solstice was until ten days ago, so I suppose you can’t be blamed for your ignorance.”

“I knew what the solstice was!”

“Astronomically speaking. What do they teach you, in—”

He cut himself off, and they looked at each other warily. In the future, he was going to say, but Harry had made it abundantly clear that subject was to be so deeply buried they both forgot about it, until he got the _obfuscus_ in place.

“From my tutor,” Harry said thickly, “I received a basic magical education roughly aligned with what students here learned. My relatives—my muggle relatives—would not permit any cultural knowledge be passed on to me, and I was not a part of the coven, strictly speaking. If they celebrated the solstice, I wasn’t a part of it.”

“Right,” said Severus, though he looked as irritated by that answer as Harry felt having to form it. He looked down the book very intently, and then blinked, as if he’d forgotten there was a reason he was flipping through it. Harry scratched his wrist, wincing when that made it hurt more.

“Stop that,” Severus said, grabbing his wand. “There’s a spell here…”

“Does _legilimens_ ring any bells for you? Or maybe _obfuscus_? ” he said pointedly, meeting Harry’s eyes again. Harry sighed, but nodded. It was best to get even over that now, rather than having Severus bring it up later, since he was going to have to move his plans to seal Severus’s memories up now that bloody Quo—now that _that bastard_ was in the castle. Besides, Madame Pomfrey could put him right if anything went to wrong, hopefully, and his wrist was really starting to hurt more.

“Stop that,” Severus said, grabbing his wand. “There’s a spell here…”

“You want to cast something you’ve just read about on me?”

“Does _legilimens_ ring any bells for you? Or maybe _obfuscus_? ” he said pointedly, meeting Harry’s eyes again. Harry sighed, but nodded. It was best to get even over that now, rather than having Severus bring it up later, since he was going to have to move his plans to seal Severus’s memories up now that bloody Quo—now that _that bastard_ was in the castle. Besides, Madame Pomfrey could put him right if anything went to wrong, hopefully, and his wrist was really starting to hurt more. The Slytherin studied the page for a moment longer, then grabbed Harry’s arm above where the red welts ended and brushed the tip of his wand along the injury. “ _Kaladerma._”

If Harry winced, it wasn’t only because of the wand touching the tender skin. The magic was effective, to be sure, but whenever Severus let any of his magic loose from the tight constraints he kept it in it was always… bitter. Bristly. Brittle? Like getting muggle stitches with insufficient numbing, and Harry knew what that felt like, thanks to a vague memory he had of falling into a ditch with broken glass while running away from… something. But the spell did the trick, even if Severus had to repeat it several times before he was satisfied.

He still didn’t let go, though, his bony fingers keeping a tight grip. His wand crept up, pushing Harry’s sleeve further up his forearm… revealing more of the narrow, jagged scar that ran up it. Harry winced and tried to pull away, but as slight as Severus was built, he was strong.

“What is that from?” he asked, his voice dropping to a mere murmur.

“None of your business,” Harry said roughly. Severus waited, but Harry couldn’t think beyond the
rapidly increasing drumming of his blood in his ears. “Let go.”

“Answer.”

“Let go and I will!”

Severus released him, and Harry felt a rush of relief, pulling his sleeve back down. He’d dimmed the memory of what had happened when he had gotten it, but only part way, and that almost made it worse. All the people were gone. He remembered a graveyard, and a ritual with a cauldron… and pain and fear that he didn’t think could just have been caused by having his arm mutilated, but now he didn’t know what the real cause was and could only prove that it had happened at all by the scar. Even—someone had died, he knew that, and he thought that was why he had left the memory in, since he’d told people about an accident that had brought him to Hogwarts. He’d used the story, but he didn’t remember who it was or what their name was or why they’d died, only what had happened to him… and he didn’t appreciate Severus running his kn— wand, running his wand up the same path the knife had followed…

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Explain.”

“Why should I?”

“You said you would.”

“Maybe I was lying.”

Severus’s eyes narrowed, and his magic flickered, bristling edges threatening to push out of the confines of his body. Harry sighed, and pushed up his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose and sort out how he could tell the story. He didn’t want to break their… rapport with a lie. He just had to figure out how much he could tell… and he suspected that was rather less than he even still knew.

“I told you I’ve been exposed to dark magic before.”

“Blood magic?”

“Someone else was casting it.” Harry licked his lips, trying to recall what he could, without reaching for too much. He didn’t fancy another headache—but for whatever reason, Severus relaxed. Typical. “They had to use… someone’s blood, I think. It’s probably better left forgotten.”

“And what did the ritual accomplish?”

“Nothing I can tell you about.”

“You can’t use that excuse every time!”

Harry glared at Severus. “Even if I could tell you without endangering my own existence, I wouldn’t! Not when you’re being so insufferable!” he snapped—but he knew his temper was just a cover for a panic he couldn’t understand. He really didn’t like talking about that night… he knew that much. Even if he couldn’t remember what happened, or when, or why. But he needed to make sure Severus did not try to find a way out of his decision. “And I don’t remember, anyways. Speaking of which, we need to go to the classroom after dinner.”
“I figured. I found another book to look through, to see if there’s any more—”

“So that I can seal your memories.”

Severus’s recoiled. “You said you were going to—”

“I’ve already done mine. If there are Death Eaters looking into your mind—”

The door squeaked again, and both boys jumped as Madame Pince came in, returning from lunch. She turned her nose up at them as she settled behind her desk, and Harry leaned in, dropping his voice to a near whisper, knowing that even over the holiday she wouldn’t tolerate loud conversation. “Look, I told you I was going to do this.”

“You’ve already done yours?”

“Yes, Thursday.” And not a moment too soon.

“Then you—I—” His eyes were wide as he tried to voice the incredulity better communicated by his face. “I know more about…”

“Potentially. I don’t know. I wrote myself notes, to remember. Don’t ask,” he warned. “I know enough to keep working and find my way forward. Not enough for my memories to fall into the wrong hands. Don’t make me lose that peace of mind.”

“And you’re…” Severus seemed to go a bit green as he looked Harry over, although Harry was unsure what he was trying to determine by looking. The obfuscus was mind magic, after all.

“My mind is still relatively intact,” he said dryly. More damage had been done to him in this morning than in the dimming of what felt like half of his memories. “As you might imagine, not being able to access several years worth of everyday memories is a bit disconcerting, but I’d choose this over the potential danger of, you know, erasing my own existence and or causing a paradox that destroys the universe. Just generally speaking.”

“Potential danger!” Severus exclaimed, earning them a sharp look and a pointed cough from Madame Pince. His eyes widened even further, and it might have been a comical effect, especially combined with the squeak his voice had jumped to, had Harry been in a laughing mood. “Harry, the book emphasized that this was only to be used with great caution, that the risk of—”

“You know why I absolutely had to do it anyways. Despite the risk. Lo and behold, it worked out.” Severus’s face twisted into pinched consternation, struggling with his wish to discuss the memories that had no doubt led Harry to trying the spell and his grudging understanding of the situation. “But you didn’t have to rush into it like that,” he landed on saying at last. “You should have—”

“What, should I have waited for you to give me the go-ahead? The official Severus Snape seal of approval?” Harry folded and unfolded his hands, cracking the knuckles. “I’ve told you before: my decisions regarding things that drastically affect my life are mine and mine alone to make. It’s not that I don’t value your opinion, it’s that I’m the only one who gets to make choices about what I do. Got it?”

"When you're trying to convince me to perform the same spell on my mind, I think I should have some input in the matter!" Severus hissed back. He glanced over to where Madame Pince sat glaring at them, and finally thought to use his wand under the table to put up a muffliato, his magic spiking erratically with an angry lack of control. "Harry, this is—this isn’t like asking me to learn legilimency. This is tampering with my mind!"
"Which is why I did mine first," Harry growled back. "And you are gaining just as much as I am, helping me with occlumency. More, probably."

"That's not what I— You're demanding that I do something that could put me in St. Mungo's! Permanently!"

Harry wanted to bang his head against the table. Severus’s squeaking was not helping his headache. "Look," he said, voice quavering with his effort to keep it under control. "I have had… an incredibly shit-filled day so far. We already determined the obfuscus is necessary. I now have proof that I can perform the spell at a much higher level than what I'll need to use on you without doing any major damage, so while of course I'm going to be damn careful that I don't do anything that could negatively affect you, I'm also confident that I can do it, and that I need to. Especially if you're telling me that the people who work for bloody Voldemort are attempting to read your mind on a semi-regular basis! This is as much for your sake as it is for mine, and it's going to happen whether you like it or not!"

By the end, he was nearly shouting. Severus stared at him, his rebuttal hanging just behind his teeth where his tongue was poised to put shape to his anger, but for a minute they just stared at each other.

Harry took a long, unsteady breath in, and with great effort forced himself to take off his glasses, set them on the table between them, and pinch the bridge of his nose, pressing his thumb and index finger until they slid down under his eyes. His hand was shaking a bit, but it wasn't from his anger: it was from the lingering effects of 'Quora's' cruciatus.

"Severus," he said shortly. "We are both… Very independent, stubborn idiots. Maybe me more than you. I don't know. But I just got signed up for a job that I did not want at all, at your pushing. I just had to take on more work when I'm a bloody NEWT student and trying to invent a branch of magic that has a lot of misinformation and nearly nothing solid that I can research. I just got put into a spot where I'm going to be affecting this time even more than I already am, which is, oh yeah, potentially the end of the world for me.

"So I want to use a spell on you that I have proven I can perform safely. Yes, there are some risks to it, it will make me at least somewhat safe in the world. Considering I have probably pissed off a Dark Lord, and considering every second I spend here is bringing me closer and closer to my inevitable doom, any bit of safety I can possible get it is at least a few minute's peace of mind. A few days’ more time.

"So sue me. I don't care how much this idea seems like a terrible one to you. It's happening."

They sat in stony silence for another long minute, until the bells started to toll. Harry picked up his glasses and set them back on his nose, raising his eyes to meet Severus’s, unsure of what he would find there. Nothing, apparently—the Slytherin’s face was as if carved from stone, and his eyes listless and dark. After a moment he folded his thin lips in to wet them, and then spoke. "You agreed to let me show you my occlumency,"

"I did," Harry said. "And if it will make you feel better, you can legilimize me, to see how wonderfully not broken my mind remains. Hell, I'll even show you what it was like when I cast it. That’s actually going to be important, because you're going to need to occlude pretty intently and there’s only so much I can help with that.”

"Why are you pushing this now?" Severus asked. "You weren’t, at lunch. Did something happen with—with the new Professor? He looked mostly harmless."

Harry gnashed his teeth, knowing he literally wouldn’t be able to explain—and even if he could, he
“Don’t start on that again. I’ve got contacts at the OMRL, if it comes to that, which it won’t if I ever find two minutes to get back to my research. And you hate the idea of networking even more than I do. You make fun of suck-ups left and right.”

“That’s fine for me. I’m set. I’ve got friends in the right places, who think it will be to their benefit to secure me an apprenticeship, and who have the influence to do so. You’ve got a House Elf that’s not even yours, two liberal radicals, and a Dark Lord you’ve gone out of your way to irritate. You need all the help you can get.”

“And the librarians,” Harry repeated, pressing his fingers into the skin under his eyes. At this rate he really would be asking the librarians for help, because he’d have to follow Gregory Spencer to the States just to get a free moment to read. “And at least my friends don’t try to read my mind when I—ever.”

Severus winced. “Well, just go to—what was his name? Quota?”

“Quora.”

“Just tell him you really don’t have the time.”

“I tried. You and Slughorn shut me down, and I’ve already signed the contract, anyways. It’s no use.” What he was thinking was I’d like to see you try to say no to the bastard, but… “It doesn’t matter. This whole discussion is just dawdling. Let’s go get your memories sorted, and that will be one thing off my plate.”

Severus’s face tilted down a bit, casting it into shadow. “Let me show you—I can fight you off. I know I can.”

“It’s not me you need to be able to defend against.”

“Harry,” Severus said, almost pleading. “Let me show you.”

Harry took another long, unsteady breath, and nodded.

“Again.”
“Why?”

“I can prove to you—”

Severus was cut off by his own coughing, and Harry sighed. They’d been at it for half an hour, locked in the classroom they’d commandeered with all the wards in place, and both were looking worse for the wear. Harry, who had been irritated and exhausted before he’d had to cast borderline dark arts, was pale and shaking, but not nearly as bad as Severus, who was bent over, looking like he was going to puke.

“What are you trying to prove, exactly?” Harry asked. “This is pointless. All it’s doing is tiring us both out. Do you really want to go into the *obfuscus* without proper control?”

“I don’t—”

“And do you really want me getting even further into your mind?”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, wedging his shaking hands against his body, and fixed Severus with a glare. The longer they went on, the more certain Harry became. Severus had managed to put up something of a fight, at first, but Harry hadn’t held back in the slightest, tearing into the other boy’s mind with impunity. Once he got past the paltry defenses… it was almost alarming what he could do.

Angry as he was, he had hardly needed a moment to find himself in the hall of paintings he imagined Severus’s mind to be, and it was as though the volume had been turned up to maximum on all his memories. He crashed through scenes with impunity, never lingering for longer than a moment before jumping to the next, and the next—and while he wasn’t entirely sure what all he had seen, the longer it went on, the easier it became for him to identify Severus in each of the memories—not just some kid with greasy hair a harsh name and a sharp tongue, but Severus. He didn’t like it. Didn’t like understanding Severus in this unnatural way. He could almost feel himself giving into Severus’s fear of what the *obfuscus* might do to him—but he would not. It was necessary, and even Severus could understand the use of it, under his terror.

Severus was trying to stand up straight, to hide how desperate his lack of control over even his mind was making him feel—but Quora’s earlier words, half-heard at the time but clear, were echoing in Harry’s head… *Legilimency has more uses than what a novice occlumens such as yourself could ever imagine, Mr. Harrigan, and it makes pretending so easy…* Harry felt sick, but he understood. Doubted Quora would see this knowing as anything less than a tool.

But that was Quora. He was *supposed* to be capable of terrible things. Harry? Even knowing it was possible— He was doing his best to ignore the rush he’d gotten, when he’d realized how easy it was. He’d almost forgotten it was Severus whose mind he was channelling his anger into. That the control he gained didn’t mean anything, really

“Do it again,” Severus insisted, even though he was still half bent over, shaking.

“No.”

“Harry, I’m not going to—”

“Sev,” said Harry, cutting him off. “It’s your turn. Legilimize me. It’s fear driving you to push back—trust me, I know better than I ever wanted to. I can show you exactly what is going to happen.”

Severus eyed Harry, his mouth still open waiting to finish his protest, but then he closed it, slowly drew himself upright, and pulled his wand from his robes. For a moment, Harry started on his usual
routine of gearing himself into full-blown occlumency that he had been practicing with Severus before, but then he stopped: Quora was in the castle now, and he wouldn’t wait for Harry to be ready. He had to start pushing himself to truly master his defenses. He met Severus’s eye and gave a jerky nod, building up his control as Severus raised his wand…

“Legimens.”

It was easier, in a way, to let Severus into his mind now that everything he truly needed to hide was completely out of reach. He held onto that feeling of security as he called on the memories, that it might influence Severus—and hoping it would dampen some of the anxiety he’d felt attempting the spell.

He didn’t remember much of what he had done in preparation—writing the letter to himself was a particularly spotty memory, the words on the page impossible to read despite being by all appearances legible, and there was a completely blank gap after that. But he let Severus view the whole thing—even the bit where he had forgotten who he was—and then read the letter afterwards, and then, because while they were at it he might as well get the practice, he pushed the other boy out of his mind, and then they were standing in the classroom again.

Severus toppled down to his knees.

“I can’t do that,” he whispered. “Clearing my mind like that—selectively bringing stuff forward. I can’t isolate things that well. It shouldn’t be— I can’t.”

“That’s why it will be the both of us,” Harry explained. “I’ll be in your mind helping you build up your occlumency and draw out the memories, and you’ll just hold that while I cast the spell. It’s not as hard as defending yourself against someone trying to get in, you know. If you did the meditation exercises in the book like I said you should, you wouldn’t find it difficult at all.”

“You were standing there for hours!”

“I had rather more memories to sort through than you do. You only have to get rid of a week, and only bits and pieces out of that. I was doing years. That takes a bit longer.”

“I can’t focus as well as you on a good day. How can you expect me to do it like—like this? I’m exhausted!”

He was begging, Harry realized. Down on his knees and all. Harry swallowed, steeling himself—drawing on some of the conviction he now knew Severus was capable of.

“I can expect you to because it’s a matter of life and death for me. And it’s your own fault you’re exhausted. We could have already been done and gone, you know. We should get started as soon as possible; I don’t want to be stuck here all night.”

But Severus did look exhausted, even as he stood and rested against the desk again, and as certain as Harry was that the obfuscus needed to be done, he really didn’t want to leave anything up to chance when it came to casting mind magic. His first sickening adventures into legilimency had taught him that.

Sighing, he waved his wand, summoning up the time in glowing numerals that hung in the air. Six forty-seven in the evening—already? He hadn’t made it down to the Great Hall until eleven thirty. He wasn’t sure if the afternoon felt longer or shorter than that. “I suppose we can take a break for dinner first,” he decided, hoping it would help Severus recover some of his energy. He didn’t want to leave, though, not with Quora out there and Severus likely to go lock himself in his dorm… “Hani?”
He winced as she popped into view a few seconds later—he absolutely needed to recreate his null ward, as soon as possible—but Hani looked unapologetic. Doubtless she thought he was still dealing with his hangover, as he had been when she kept him out of the kitchens that morning. That morning! It seemed much longer ago than that; Hogwarts had been a completely different place to him that morning.

“Master Harry is needing something?” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Um, well, yes,” he said, taken aback by her tone. Was he asking too much? Was she actually angry with him? “I was hoping—Severus and I are getting some defense studying in, and I was wondering if you could bring us our dinner here? We don’t really have time to stop…”

Hani’s lips thinned. “Master Harry should be eating in the Great Hall with the other students,” she said. Her green eyes darted towards Severus, and if that wasn’t a hint of displeasure on her face…

“Master Harry should be following the rules.”

Harry tilted his head. That did sound like she was annoyed—about the firewhiskey, no doubt. “Hani, I’m sorry, but I can’t do that,” he said slowly, and he held up his arm, tugging the sleeve away from his wrist. It was still a bit red. “Remember the book I was trying to read yesterday? It was really hard to focus, because the ward that I made to help make my magic… to keep my magemetry in control, it was failing. And this morning the ward broke completely.” He paused, watching her think; he’d only had the ward for about two weeks, after all, so her skepticism was entirely reasonable. “Everything’s gone a little haywire.”

“Haywire?” Hani echoed.

“Sideways. Out of control,” he clarified. She didn’t seem convinced. Harry glanced at Severus, but he was looking at his shaking hands and frowning. This was all a mess, Harry thought, and he pushed his hand through his hair. “Well, if not, that’s alright, then. I can skip today,” he said, and hated himself for it when Hani’s eyes widened. “That’s alright. Oh—did you know? I’ve been signed on as that new Professor’s assistant. I’m going to be even busier once the term starts, so I might not see you as often. Not enough time.”

For a moment Hani’s lip quavered, and then in one great burst she started sobbing, tears the size of pebbles filling her green eyes. Harry gaped. Had he taken his ruse too far? He hadn’t meant to make her cry, just to upset her a little bit… well, not to upset her; that would be mean, he didn’t mean to… he wasn’t…

“Hani?” he asked, kneeling down. Over her shoulder Severus looked entirely unimpressed, cringing away from the noise as he raised an eyebrow at Harry. “I’m sorry. I’ll try to visit you, you know you’re my closest friend…”

But Hani wasn’t going to be consoled. She snapped her fingers, even as she sobbed, and a few plates of spaghetti, cutlery, napkins, and goblets appeared, floating through the air at dangerously steep angles but somehow managing to keep hold of their contents until they found a desk to rest on, and then she disappeared with another crack, not even looking at Harry.
“Nice,” Severus commented.

“Oh, shut up and eat the spaghetti,” Harry snapped, staring at the spot Hani’d filled. That was two people he’d pissed off in one day. At least Severus wasn’t crying. Just begging.

Shit. Bloody, buggering—

“I mean it.” Severus slowly pulled out the seat from the desk the spaghetti had settled on, taking one of the plates. “Emotional manipulation, very nice. In Slytherin, we normally save that for Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors, but I suppose you Ravenclaws are more pragmatic and include your ‘friends’ as well.”

Harry sighed, standing, and took the chair across from Severus. The spaghetti would probably have been mouth-watering any other day, but now he was breathing through his mouth and swallowing quickly just to get it down. They both ate without vigor, the only sound between them the clink of silverware and muffled chewing.

Harry only made it through half his plate before he gave up, grabbing instead his goblet and swirling about the pumpkin juice inside. Severus watched him through half-shut eyes. “Is that what legilimency is supposed to be like?” he eventually asked, pausing between mouthfuls.

Harry shrugged listlessly. “I think that’s how they tried to teach me,” he said. “I’ve had my mind torn open like that before, and I don’t know why I would have except for lessons.”

“Why haven’t you done that before?”

“Attacked you like that?” He glanced up to meet Severus’s gaze. “Would we ever have gotten anywhere? If I had just done that to you from the first, would you ever have learned how to legilimize me in return, or to even start to fight back?” He shook his head. “I don’t take pleasure out of hurting people like that, anyways,” he said, swallowing the instantaneous doubt that arose.

He had. He had revelled in the power, even as it made Severus shake, and then he’d gone and hurt Hani like that without a moment’s hesitation.

“You can’t grow without struggle,” Severus argued. “I might have fought you off if I’d faced anything like that before.”

“You don’t start someone learning potions on the Draught of Living Death. Or Charms with the Patronus.”

“You still haven’t shown that to me.”

“The Patronus?”

“I don’t believe you can. You’re nothing special in Charms.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I got an ‘O’ on the OWL, didn’t I? You’ll just have to take my word for it.”

“Why don’t you cast it now, if you’re so confident?”

“Do you want me wasting even more energy before I cast a spell on you?” Harry shook his head. “I’m not in the mood, anyways. And you should be mentally preparing yourself.” He cracked his neck and stretched his arms out, weaving his fingers together and pushing his palms out. “You found out yesterday night that all sorts of people can push into your mind. If anything, you should be glad you won’t have to try and keep this hidden. It’s much easier to keep yourself from revealing secrets if
you don’t remember them.”

“You don’t think I can keep a secret?”

“Severus. Please?”

Severus grit his teeth, stabbing at a meatball with his fork. “If we do this,” he said at last. “What will the process be?”

Harry studied Severus carefully. “You’re going to choose a phrase that will be the keystone to the spell. It can’t be something well-known, or you risk triggering the memories accidentally—it’s a very small chance, without the spell, but it would be dangerous and you’ve said you don’t want to risk your mind.

“When you have your phrase, you’re going to go through and sort out as best you can any memories you have of thinking about my situation. I’ll be legilimizing you to help you occlude everything else.”

And to make sure Severus wasn’t intentionally leaving any memories out, but he didn’t need to know Harry had thought of that. Either Severus would earnestly seek out all the memories and never know Harry’s suspicions, or Harry would catch him. Either way, it would be done right.

“Then you’ll maintain the occlumency, while I’m going to cast the obfuscus. If you end up confused like I was, I should be able to legilimize you again and bring your occlusion down.”

Severus looked rather green as he stared down at the remnants of the spaghetti he was pushing around his plate, not responding. Harry closed his eyes for a moment, reinforcing his own occlumency, and with forced calmness and a spell banished the dinnerware back to the kitchens.

“Have you got a phrase?” he asked.

Severus’s gaze rose, though it did not make it higher than Harry’s chin. Whatever was going on in that mind… well, Harry would know soon enough. The shaking had stopped with the meal, at least, and Harry hoped the silence wasn’t Severus building up for another argument. He rolled his wand between his fingers, waiting.

At last, Severus nodded.

Harry raised his wand.
Harry spent the last day of his holiday hard at work. It was quiet when he had no one around to talk to. After his arguments with Severus the day before—not to mention everything else that happened—they both needed space. Harry had skipped breakfast and gone straight to the library, so the only other person he saw all morning was Madam Pince, who gave him one sharp glance and then ignored him altogether. He hadn’t seen Kirke, Floyd, or the other students since Christmas, and none of them were foolish enough to spend their last day of freedom cooped up in the dusty shelves of books.

Harry, on the other hand, thought it was the perfect place to hide from both people and his troubled thoughts. He hadn’t got much sleep without the null ward, Quora’s office with it’s heavy warding a magnet for his sense, the apocalyptic potential it contained hooked into his thoughts. He was going on several nights poor sleep, and needed something to distract himself.

His project was simple: he planned to hide the keys to his and Severus’s *obfuscus* spells within a book, and then to hide that book within the library’s collection. Currently the two papers were in Ravenclaw Tower, hidden underneath an old notebook in his desk drawer, which had acquired a few new protective charms. It wasn’t the most secure place, but Hector wasn’t one to snoop behind anyone’s back. Until Harry could put the book in place, it would have to do.

He spent the morning in the library, trying to draw up a list of protective charms to put on the book. Flitwick had taught them a handful of combinations that worked particularly well together, spells that built off each other to create stronger defenses, but Harry quickly concluded that spells taught to sixth year NEWT students would be insufficient—after all, it would take nothing more than another sixth year to get past them—but the charms section of the library was so extensive he wasn’t sure where to begin. It was clumsy, slow work, like his early research on time travel: all he could do was take a book off the shelf, scan it for anything relevant, and go onto the next.

By lunchtime, Harry had grown impatient enough to ask Flitwick for suggestions of books to look into. He approached the tiny charms professor, and when he explained his query, Flitwick beckoned him to come around and sit with him at the staff table.

Harry hesitated a moment, but Professor McGonagall, on Flitwick’s other side, had heard and made no comment, so he supposed it was alright, and he was technically a staff member now. Besides, the seat Harry would be filling was between Flitwick and Notaro, and if he had to sit with teachers, they were preferable. Notaro, reading as she sipped a goblet of wine, glanced up to give him a ready smile as he came around and sat next to her, a leg of roast chicken appearing on his plate.

“An interesting topic, Mr. Harrigan,” Flitwick mused. “Although I must voice my surprise. You did not seem particularly interested in class.”

Harry flushed. “Well, that’s the thing, Professor,” he lied. “I’ve not been able to give charms as much time as I’ve needed to, recently, so I don’t think I’ve quite mastered the materials. And this sort of
thing will be on the NEWT, won’t it? I’ve always learned more from practical projects, you see, so I thought…”

“Oh of course.” Flitwick smiled across Harry. “And I’m sure Clarke can spare her allotment of your time for a while.”

Notaro chuckled softly, though when she looked up from her book it wasn’t to reply. Instead, her eyes found Quora, coming in through the doors at the other end of the Great Hall, deep in conversation with Professor Sprout. Harry forced himself to look away, and squeezed his fork tighter, as though it could help him keep from jumping out of his seat and bolting. Flitwick, on the other hand, didn’t seem to notice, even as the pair settled on the other side of the headmaster’s empty spot, beyond Professor McGonagall.

He couldn’t run away. He couldn’t. He was going to be faced with the man’s presence on a daily basis, sometimes one-on-one. He couldn’t…

“What are you intending to enchant?”

“I thought a book. You know, for protecting information that needs to be kept, but kept confidential,” Harry said, and belatedly fished the list he’d written up from the pocket of his robe, hoping Flitwick wouldn’t notice the bits of lint. “I’ve been in the library all morning, looking for more of the golden combinations you had talked about, but I think I started at the wrong end of the charms section. These were what I could think of, but…”

Flitwick scanned his list. “I didn’t teach you half of these,” he said, laughing. “That’s Ionus Iuniper’s trio with an added—perception spell?”

“Ionus Iuniper?” Harry repeated slowly. “I’m sorry—which one, sir?” Flitwick pointed at it. “Oh, that. I just thought—you said to build across spell categories, right? That’s how people find golden combinations? They do the same for multi-part warding systems on houses. I mean, from what I’ve read…”

“Let me see?” Notaro said, closing her book. Harry passed the paper onto her and pointed out the one that had caught Flitwick’s eye. “Oh, yes—in permanent warding it’s a Bazman combination, if I recall my mastery right. Goodness, Mr. Harrigan, you have an eye for them. Most people don’t go for that combination precisely because it has the same properties as Iuniper’s trio. Without a delicate touch, it can block off the house entirely, not letting anyone or anything through. The amplified perception charms can be particularly problematic, as it is difficult to dismantle a ward when you aren’t able to focus on it.”

She passed back the paper.

“Well,” said Flitwick, squinting up at Harry. “I certainly wouldn’t have thought to add a fourth dimension to that combination. Perhaps the time you’ve devoted to catching up to Clarke’s class will have some extra benefit here, hm?”

“I, uh, hope so. I’d like to get caught up in yours, as well, sir.”

“You’re not particularly behind—this list proves it! And I am sure you will be content with your last quiz grade. But how about this, then,” Flitwick proposed, his smile returning. “I propose a challenge—or, rather, I propose for you to challenge me. If you can create something that gives me a challenge to unravel, then you will earn yourself extra credit. I’m sure your runes work will give you an edge, hm?”
“I haven’t done any of the practical enchanting work that the other students have, though,” Harry confessed. “Just the ward work.”

“‘Just’, he says,” Notaro said fondly. “Well, if you do take this on, you are free to ask me for help. I’m sure it will assist you in any catching up you might need to do, after all.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You and Clarke? Well, then, if you are to get help—from Clarke, or any of your other friends, I think is fair—I will have to put more of a leg out. Perhaps I will enlist…” He turned his head, glancing down the line of other professors, then waited a moment, before calling out: “Professor Quora?”

If Harry flinched, then Quora definitely caught it as he turned from his plate to raise an eyebrow at Flitwick. “Yes, Filius?”

“I have issued Mr. Harrigan here a challenge, which is to challenge me with a bit of enchantment, in turn for extra credit. Clarke has offered her help to him, so I think it is only fair that I come with backup as well. What say you, Tim? If I recall, you did do a good bit of curse breaking, in your younger years.”

Harry flushed as the other professors turned their eyes on him, looking away from Quora. At the close end of Slytherin table, Severus, though facing away, had paused in his eating, no doubt listening in to the suddenly more public conversation.

“Of course, Filius,” Quora agreed. “It’s been some time since I had the chance to practice.”

“I don’t know that I’ll be able to present you with much of a challenge, Professors,” Harry said, growing a bit nervous that this was getting out of his hands.

“Well, we can’t go around giving credit to merely average work, can we?” Quora drolly, raising an eyebrow. He was much more restrained in this public setting. “That being said… I seem to recall you expressing concerns about your already busy schedule. I hope your grades will not suffer for the extra project.”

“It’s a practical study, well worth the time,” Flitwick said, not directly disagreeing with the man. “And it will help you tremendously on the midterm, which—well, I don’t want to give it away just yet! But study your counterspells as you create this, Mr. Harrigan, and you will prosper.”

“Of course, Professor. Thank you.”

Notaro offered Harry another smile. “I am sure your assistant will rise to the challenge, Professor Quora. He hasn’t disappointed us yet. And with the rest of the students back tonight, I’m sure some of his friends can help him as well.”

“Perhaps.”

Harry shifted awkwardly in his seat, relieved as Quora turned his attention back to Professor Sprout. “Does this mean you won’t help me, sir? I really wasn’t having any luck in the library.”

“Did you ask Madam Pince for direction?”

“Erm…”

Flitwick laughed and dug in his robes for a quill, taking Harry’s list back. “I’ll see what I think of
while we eat, hm?”

After lunch, armed suggestions in Flitwick’s tight script, Harry went down to the kitchens. It was the last day of holidays, after all, and Notaro had reminded him that the rest of the students would be coming soon. His wrist was itching underneath his sleeve, reminding him that the null ward was gone. He hadn’t expected.

Harry stood outside of the kitchens, unsure of how he was going to handle his inevitable conversation with Hani, for a good five minutes before he realized she was not inside. Then he spent another few locating her (in Gryffindor tower, with two other elves) before he shook his head and stepped forward to tickle the pear, guilt making his stomach flip as he went inside.

It didn’t matter how stressed he had been. Severus had been right, saying guilt tripping counted as ‘emotional manipulation’. Harry knew she felt strongly about how he needed to take better care of himself, after what had happened to her mistress. He’d taken advantage of that in the worst possible way, and he couldn’t blame his bad mood or Quora or Severus or anything else for what he’d said to her. He didn’t know how to earn a house elf’s forgiveness, but he vowed to himself that he would do it.

“Master Harry is looking for Hani?” a small voice asked, drawing him out of his thoughts. It was Moggy, the librarian’s elf on loan, looking up at Harry with an unreadable expression. He was the only elf who had come over at his entrance, the rest attending closely to whatever they were working on at the stoves and counters that lined the far wall.

“He, no. I know she’s busy upstairs. I was actually hoping…” He cleared his throat, feeling rather awkward. “Well, I haven’t been feeling well, and you know—you don’t, but I usually eat down here for dinner. I don’t like the crowds at the feasts…”

He trailed off again, but Moggy nodded solemnly. “Master Harry is being one of the Library researchers. Most is not liking loud, busy places.”

“Right,” Harry agreed. “I was hoping you could wrap me up something for dinner? A sandwich or the like. I’ll probably head up and take a early night, sleep through the feast, try and get through this—it’s a cold, probably; I don’t want to start the term under the weather.”

“Moggy will do this,” the elf agreed. “Master Harry is going and sitting by the fire, nice and warm. He is being sensible, Moggy thinks.”

Harry blinked at the elf’s solemn tone, but did as he was told, sitting on his regular stool, watching the elf’s magic at work as he snapped his fingers and bread, vegetables, meat, cheese, and some sort of sauce flew through the air, slicing and spreading and stacking themselves into a sandwich as it slowly moved towards Harry. From a cupboard on the far end of the room a napkin flew across to wrap itself around the sandwich, tying off in a neat knot just before dropping the final distance into Harry’s lap. Strangely, tied into the knot was a spoon.

The elf himself disappeared into a side store room, re-emerging with a glass jar. With a few more burst of magic, some of the vegetables that hadn’t gone into the sandwich zoomed towards Harry and landed past him in a large pot suspended on a spit in the fire. He craned his neck to peer inside, recognizing the smell of chicken—indeed, it seemed the carcasses of the chickens that had been served for lunch were being cooked to broth inside. That accounted for the spoon, then. All the vegetables stayed neatly to one side of the pot, joined shortly by wide noodles that grew pliable practically as soon as they touched with the broth. Moggy came over, smelled it, and summoned some spices from the storeroom he’d brought the jar from, which landed neatly in the bottom of the jar as he opened it. The noodles and vegetables re-emerged from the stock to join the spices, and
with a more concentrated effort, Moggy directed a stream of the broth to join the rest of it, just enough to fill to the curve of the jar below the threading.

Satisfied, Moggy tightened the lid and handed the soup to Harry, who tucked it and the sandwich into his bag. “Thank you, Moggy,” he said. “Should I bring these down tomorrow morning?”

The elf shook his head. “Elves will fetch them tonight. Is Master Harry needing lunch now?”

“No, thank you; I ate upstairs with the Professors. The chicken was delicious.” He’d barely tasted the chicken, once Quora had shown up, but it was all he could remember being served.

Still, Moggy nodded, apparently satisfied with the comment. “Moggy will pass on Master Harry’s words to the others,” he said. “They is seeing that Hani is upset, and knowing Master Harry is saying something cruel.”

Harry winced. “Is she alright? I need to apologize, but I don’t want to take any time out of her day…”

Moggy looked offended by this. “Master Harry is not needing to apologize,” he said sternly. “We is elves, even if these Hogwarts elves is being stubborn and strange. Hani should be apologizing to Master Harry.”

“No,” Harry said firmly, when he realized the elf was being entirely serious. He’d half-forgotten Moggy was a different sort of elf than the ones here, having his own family. Of course he would express different beliefs. “She’s not done anything wrong; I have. I don’t care if she’s an elf, Moggy; she’s my friend. Friends don’t make each other cry like that.”

As he spoke, a few of the elves working turned to look over their shoulders at him, but they quickly got back to work when they saw he’d noticed them. If they were angry with him, too, they had every right to be. Moggy just shook his head.

“As Master Harry is saying,” he agreed, tone suggesting that he didn’t agree at all. “If that is all, Moggy is returning to work.”

“Of course. Sorry for pulling you away. Thanks for your help.”

The elf bowed low, and Harry stood, hurrying out of the kitchens. He turned upstairs, though he lingered outside the library for a few minutes, wondering if Pince would be able to tell he had food in his bag. After brief consideration, he hid it behind a suit of armor, which peered down at him suspiciously. “I’ll be right back,” he told it. The magic in it didn’t so much as flicker, but… “Don’t let anyone take that bag, please.”

Flitwick had instructed Harry on which shelves held the relevant materials, which made locating the books much easier. He took the first two on the list and hurried up to the desk, where Madam Pince sneered at him over her glasses, even as she pulled out the library cards to fill.

“You have three books out already, Mr. Harrigan,” she said, sniffing as she came to his slot in her charmed rolodex. The cards snapped into place behind the others, floating in the circle.

“I’ll be bringing them back soon…”

“See that you do.” She snapped the second book’s cover shut and pushed them across her desk towards him, though her hand lingered on the book a bit too long. Harry didn’t dare try to yank them out from under her talon-like fingers, and shuddered under her glare. She truly was an unpleasant woman.
As soon as she let go, he snatched up the books and fled the library, the creaky door groaning shut behind him. As he finagled the books into his bag, trying not to squash the sandwich, he considered his options. He needed a good place to settle in and read for the afternoon, but he wasn’t ready to go back to Ravenclaw tower yet. His thoughts turned momentarily to the altar room he had found before… he was certain to be left alone there. But it didn’t seem right, either, to use it for something as small as needing a spot to read. It was someone’s holy place, and he was an intruder. But Quora was still down in the Great Hall, and hadn’t seemed interesting in bothering Harry, for now.

He ended up settling in the small revisions room, legs bent to fit in the window sill, the first book balancing on his knees, a scrap of parchment sticking charmed to the stone above it, the trailing end of his quill being bent as he absently chewed at it. It was easier for Harry to focus on books than to pay attention in class, so he took his time with it, reading carefully even the parts that he was certain Flitwick had already explained.

Perhaps it was testament to how much he had grown over the last year and a half that when he felt the students flooding into the castle, Harry just sighed and closed his book. The first time he had felt all of them, the night of the welcoming feast and his re-sorting, he had barely been able to stand, let alone think. Now, it struck him more as an inconvenient distraction than anything else.

Sighing, he returned to the dorm. He wasn’t particularly hungry, but Moggy had gone out of his way for him, so Harry unwrapped the sandwich and sipped at the soup, kept warm by a spell on the jar’s seal. Delicious as it was, Moggy had the same approach to sandwiches as Hani did, which was to pack the bread so full of toppings that Harry could barely get his mouth around it. He wrapped up the leftover—which was more than half—and tried his hand at a preservation charm, tucking it into his desk drawer alongside a bar of chocolate and an apple that had stubbornly remained fresh since October.

Then he sat on his bed to meditate, trying to get his magic reaccustomed to the other students. How much easier this would have been with the null ward, he thought bitterly, scratching at his wrist. Another thing he needed to work on. As if he didn’t have enough projects and a new ‘job’ on his hands…

Even through the crowd and the enchantments on the Great Hall, Quora was still like a beacon to him. His presence there at the table, between Professors Sprout and Sinistra, within feet of both Albus Dumbledore and hundreds of kids who wouldn’t be able to defend themselves worth a damn if he suddenly were to break character, was uncomfortable to say the least. Of course Quora seemed perfectly under control, even when suddenly the whole hall’s attention was on him—his formal introduction, no doubt—but it didn’t stop Harry from picking out Hector and Pandora and, after a second thought, Severus, from the crowd, keeping careful tabs on them.

By the time they the students began to filter out of the hall, Harry was absolutely exhausted, and was a few unexpected spells away from screaming in frustration at the sheer amount of magic Hogwarts crammed into its halls… but he had kept his head. He drew his senses back into the room, focusing on the little bits of magic that surrounded him. In a way that was more difficult than picking through the tangled web of students, and he was so tired he was having trouble reeling it in. With any luck, that meant he was tired enough he would be able to fall to sleep without dealing with it… But not yet. He could tell that Pandora and Hector were hurrying up, ahead of the rest of the students, and he could guess that their hurry was to find him. Dragging his feet, he went down to the common room to say hello, slumping on a chaise lounge near the statue of Rowena Ravenclaw.

When they came in through the door, Harry pushed himself back to his feet and hurried across the circular room, angling slightly towards the stairs to the dormitories, in hope that the other two would get.
“Happy New Year, Harry,” Pandora said cheerfully, at the same time Hector ground out: “You weren’t at the feast.”

Harry blinked, but smiled at the ‘good cop, bad cop’ image that came to mind. “Happy New Year,” he repeated. “I wasn’t at the feast, no. I’ve had a bit of a headache—and what feasts have I ever gone to, besides the sorting?”

Hector pursed his lips, looking Harry up and down critically. “Did you eat at all?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Don’t mind Hector,” Pandora said. “He’s just grumpy that he couldn’t gossip about your new job to your face.”

Harry winced. “Did Dumbledore really announce that?”

Hector shook his head. “No, there was a prefects’ meeting on the train. They mentioned you’d be helping Professor Quora with the transition, and that we should see if there was anything we could do to help get everyone caught up.”

“You’re not a prefect,” Harry said. It came out as a question—now that he thought about it, he knew Sanchez was one of the two for their house and year, but he had never found out who the other one was. He didn’t think he’d seen anyone else wearing the badge, but…

“Technically, I am. Lone male of our year, before you showed up, so it fell to me by default. Professor Flitwick doesn’t make me do anything except make myself available to the younger boys, but…” Hector made a face. “Sanchez happened to spot me on her way up the train, and dragged me along. She thinks it’s insulting that I don’t want the extra work.”

“Huh,” said Harry. He supposed he hadn’t really started talking to the pair until last spring, but it still seemed strange to not have known this. On the other hand, he didn’t even have a clue who was Head Boy and Girl this year. Surely Dumbledore had mentioned it at the beginning of the year… and yet…

The door opened again, and Harry stiffened as the echoes of voices in the hall drifted through. He’d rather ignore the incoming tide. “Well,” said Pandora brightly, seeming to know exactly what he was thinking. “We’ll talk in the morning, Harry; I think it’s time for you to get to bed.”

Hector, for all his scrutiny, looked surprised when she said this, and his critical eye turned into worry. “Is your headache that bad? It’s still early.”

Harry feigned another smile, shaking his head. “The holiday wasn’t exactly restful,” he said. “And with the whole Quora thing… and bumping up a year for runes, officially… I need a solid eight hours tonight. More, if I’m lucky.”

“Yes you do,” Hector agreed, rather forcefully, and swung his arm around Harry’s shoulder, pulling him towards the stairs. Harry just rolled his eyes—the other boy was at the top of his usual nannying game. “Good night, Pan. Don’t let Sanchez get any ideas about next Friday.”

“Good night, boys,” she called back.

“Next Friday?” Harry asked, doing his best not to trip as he attempted to climb the steps under Hector’s grip.

“All-staff meeting. They’re never productive. Weren’t you told?”
“I haven’t gotten my schedule yet. Just heard about this yesterday.” They made it to the third landing, off which their shared room was situated, and Harry managed to duck out of Hector’s grip, pulling off his robes as he went through the door, followed shortly by his shirt. He was too tired to be embarrassed. “I’m going to take the shower first, if that’s alright?”

When Hector didn’t respond, he glanced back over his shoulder to find his friend studying him with that worried but critical look. If it had been anyone but Hector, who he’d lived with for a year and was used to, he might have felt self-conscious. After a moment, Hector seemed to notice that he was looking and gave a sharp nod, turning towards his desk and fumbling with the clasps on his robes. Maybe he really was still annoyed by the meeting. Harry shrugged and turned to head into the washroom, snagging a towel of the rack as he went.

When he came out, slightly more awake and significantly more relaxed, Hector was sitting cross-legged on his bed. At least this time he caught himself before staring, which Harry found a relief, since he was wrapped in a towel and wearing only a pair of ratty boxers. He had patience for Hector’s nagging, but not that much.

“How was your New Year’s?” Hector asked while Harry was changing into some night things: a pair of ‘Smeltings Academy’ track pants (he wasn’t sure what Smeltings Academy was, but they were what he had) and a blue Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles shirt (which he had two of, both far too large for him. Hand-me-downs, Harry thought, but he couldn’t say for sure. The sweater he usually wore was being washed).

“Quiet enough, I suppose,” Harry answered. “I mean, I talked Hani into snagging me a bottle of firewhiskey out of the seventh years’ stash, and ended up going up to the Astronomy Tower to watch the fireworks Flitwick charmed for—Hector?”

The boy had sucked in a deep breath through his teeth, and was running his hand through his hair, mussing it as he only did when he was stressed. Harry quickly ran back through what he had said, but Hector had no problem with alcohol in celebrations, as he had proven at the end-of-term party. He took a cautious step closer to Hector’s bed, which the other boy was seated on cross-legged, right in the middle.

“Hector, are you—”

“Think about what you said!” Hector snapped. “What am I supposed to think? Getting drunk all alone up on the Astronomy Tower—and that—that—”

“What?” asked Harry in growing alarm. “Flitwick’s fireworks? Hani—?”

“Your arm!”

Harry blinked several times, and lifted his arms to inspect them. They were the same as ever—well, as far as he could remember—he wasn’t entirely sure if he’d always been freckly or not. His left wrist was still red with marks from where the ward had broken, despite Severus’s healing efforts, and along his right forearm ran—

The narrow scar, bright white against his skin. With his recent interaction with Quora—with Quora—with argh, he was never going to get used to that—and the subsequent conversation with Severus, the memory of how he got it was filled with holes in his memories that made his mind burn, even though he knew that understanding what had happened to him—why he had ended up someone’s blood magic sacrifice—would hurt more than not knowing. Harry shuddered and occluded it as fiercely as he could, dragging himself into the conversation he’d had with Severus not two days ago. And with what Hector said—drunk alone on top of the Astronomy Tower—
“Oh, no, no—Hector—” Harry took a deep breath and, making up his mind quickly, came to sit on the edge of his roommate’s bed. “No. You’re reading things wrong. Understandable, but wrong. That scar—” He gestured to his arm, taking strength in the occlumency and the empty space, pretending like it happened to someone else and filling it in with the story he and Dumbledore had invented, since he couldn’t tell Hector what he had told Severus—“it was from a magical accident. The one that landed me here, and put the Professor in the Hospital and killed another student and made it so my Aunt and Uncle had to have their memories erased to keep their minds intact. Things went bad, really, really bad, but that—it was someone else. It was done to me, not by me. I would never, ever do something like that to myself.” He managed to grin for a moment, for Hector’s benefit, since he really didn’t feel up for a smile, let alone a grin. “There’s too much life to live. Too much dancing drunkenly in the moonlight with a hundred odd equally drunk elves and a fantastic display of fireworks that none of us were in our right minds to properly appreciate. And too many books to read, and runes to learn, and NEWTs to take, and all that. You understand?”

Hector jerked his head up once, but did not let go of his hair. “But you look so exhausted,” he whispered. “And you—you’ve never eaten well, and you go running into danger…and you’ve been alone…”

Harry sighed. He did look terrible, but how could he explain that he’d been put under a torture curse by their new professor, who was Quo—who was not who he seemed, and a danger to them all, without being able to say any of that—without wanting to upset Hector more, or endangering him with the burden of too much knowledge? “Budge up,” he said instead, pushing Hector out of the middle of the bed. He flopped back, staring up at the ceiling painted with stars, Hector’s anxious face blurred at the edge of his glasses.

“I’ve never been good at taking care of myself,” he said after a minute. “But it’s not because I don’t want to. It’s because I wasn’t allowed, when I was a kid, and never really learned how.” He paused for a moment, letting the words sink in for both of them; recognizing and understanding what instinct was guiding him to talk about; swallowing, accepting, and pressing on. “My relatives didn’t love me. Half the time they hated me, and the other half they ignored me, trying to make real their belief that I shouldn’t exist.” He rolled his shoulders, feeling the bed shift beside him, Hector, a dark blur in his peripheral vision, lowering himself down beside Harry, so they were shoulder to shoulder, watching the painted stars shift. “I didn’t learn to eat the way most kids do, in three guaranteed meals a day. I cooked for them, and hoped there were leftovers to snag, and so long as I wasn’t hungry did my best to put eating out of my mind. It wasn’t until I turned eleven and started learning magic that I got regular meals, but I don’t always think about eating. It’s more a habit than a need, a habit I probably forget too easily.

“And I—someone told me once—they said I went running into trouble so much because I never learned to trust other people enough to ask for help. And that I don’t communicate how I’m feeling well, because I never learned to expect other people to care.” He thought wistfully on the blank space where that face was supposed to sit, knowing that he ought to hear that voice and remember that name, and that it was for that person’s safety that he couldn’t, theirs and his and his other friend’s…

“That’s horrible,” Hector mumbled hoarsely.

Harry, drawn out of his sudden lonesomeness, shrugged. “Maybe it sounds bad to you. To me, it’s just… life. My past. I don’t have another to replace it with. I’m here now, and I’ve grown—and I’ve got you to drag me down to breakfast and Hani to tell me when I need to put down the books and sleep, and Pandora to… well, to be Pandora.” They both managed a chuckle at that, and Harry relaxed at his friend’s response. “I’m sorry if I made you worry. My holiday was for the most part quiet, but very, very busy, drunk elf parties notwithstanding. How was yours?”
Hector heaved in a long, unsteady breath, and sat up just enough to snag the picture frame off his bedside table and fall back down. Harry watched as he pried up the back to remove the photo within—a muggle one of his parents, somewhere in India, standing with their arms around each other’s waists inside an orange stone arch. Harry knew the photo well; it had lived in this room longer than he had.

“It never gets any easier,” Hector said, gently tugging the photo from the frame. “We hope it will, but…. I have haven’t explained. It’s hard to explain.” Finally he got the photo free—but it wasn’t one photo, it was two, and he handed Harry the second.

This one was a wizarding photo, made instantly apparent by nondescript pedestrians passing through blurred in the foreground. In focus, a family of four stood together in front of the dusty glass window of Ollivander’s in Diagon Alley. Harry recognized Hector’s parents first. Mr. Smithe with his watery blue eyes, receding mousy brown hair showing spots of grey, his closed-mouth smile nonetheless wide as he cleaned his glasses on his pinstriped blue-and-gold robes, a pocket square emblazoned with the OMRL crest sticking out of his chest pocket. Beside him was Doctor Smithe, matching in a light blue tunic-like dress that fell to her knees over a pair of darker blue bell-bottom jeans and accented with gold jewelry that glinted in the sunlight. Her black hair was woven into a loose braid resting on her shoulder, and she looked relaxed even in the wizarding alley, her hands resting on her childrens’ shoulders.

The boy in front of Mr. Smithe, wearing a yellow and orange striped sweater that looked like it belonged to the Chudley Cannon’s tiny fanclub, waving his new wand proudly in the air to leave behind trails of golden sparks, was definitely Hector. He had a lighter complexion than his mother and the other boy, and was the shortest and of youngest of the family by several inches and years. The other boy (taller, a broader build, darker skin, and crew cut hair) Harry didn’t recognize.

“My brother, Raj,” Hector said, at which the boy grinned and waved. “Half-brother, really. My mother was married after attending university, which was… unusual, except she was brilliant, and her family wealthy. Her first husband died in an auto accident, leaving her behind as a pregnant widow, and she decided to go back to school to pursue her childhood dream of becoming a doctor. She studied even while pregnant with Raj, and managed to successfully apply to Oxford, with her husband’s father’s influence. He was a diplomat, with many friends in high places, and hoped that Raj would be able to come here as a student himself. Mother left Raj with our grandmother in Delhi and came here to study. Her second year in the program, she met my father, doing his healing research at the OMRL, and she became pregnant on accident. He didn’t even know she had Raj at that point, and she went back to India at the end of term, rather than tell him what had happened. They were in love, but he was much older, and she a young foreigner, and them not married.”

Harry frowned, imagining the adults in the picture’s meeting—he could fill in with his memories of Oxford, of the tea shops and coffee houses nearby, no doubt much busier in the regular term. Secrets heavy between them. He wondered what they spoke of, with her studying medicine, and him delving into tomes of ancient medical magic that he could not explain.

“She did not return to Oxford until I was three, and Raj six. But she could not convince the university to allow her back into classes. Raj’s grandfather’s influence only went so far, and a foreign woman who left due to an out-of-wedlock pregnancy? She didn’t have a chance, but she kept trying, petitioning her professors one by one, fruitlessly.

“She ran into my father again. He had been looking for her since she left, but she was a muggle, you see, and he did not know how to contact her and could not just send her an owl. He had been quite heartbroken.
“Mother finally confessed everything, both her giving birth to me and her previous marriage and Raj. Father, realizing that I was most likely magical, finally had a legal excuse to tell her about magic. And he—it is the one time I’ve ever heard of him taking advantage of his status as a seat-holding pureblood. They married, and he pulled strings to make things move faster in the muggle world. Raj and I were both brought here and given immediate citizenship. Mother was re-accepted into Oxford with some obliviation and compulsion.

“Raj started primary school, and I joined him a few years later. We were close. Really close. We both had trouble in school because we had the accent, then, but Raj had it worse. He barely even knew English when he started. He didn’t get on well with my father, and didn’t understand why Mother had brought us here when she still never had time for us. But we were, for the most part, fine. We had each other, and enough money in the family that we were never for want of things, and I… I had magic.”

Hector trailed off as they heard several of the younger students giggling over something out on the stairs. A moment later Lucas Boyle, the seventh year prefect and captain of the Ravenclaw quidditch team, stuck his head in through the door. “Smithe—have you seen Crouch?”

“Barty?” Hector asked, craning his neck to look backwards at Boyle. “Not since the feast. Why?”

“He’s out after curfew again. I swear, that boy, thinks his—” Boyle cut himself off. “Lights off in ten, boys.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” they chorused, as was the Ravenclaw custom.

When Boyle disappeared down the stairs, Harry rolled over onto his belly, looking at the photo again. “You know so much about your family,” he told Hector. “I’m almost envious. But…”

Hector sighed. “Raj.”

“You never mention him.”

“When I was in third year, Pandora woke me up and told me we needed to go see Professor Flitwick, right then. I… Dad was in the floo when we knocked on his door. Flitwick told me to go through right away, to St. Mungos, without explaining at all, and my father grabbed me and we ran upstairs. Raj was… Raj was dying. And my mother…”

“Muggle Visitation Rights,” Harry realized, horrified. “Pandora’s cousin’s bill. She couldn’t…”

“They couldn’t save Raj. He had… I was with him. He was babbling something, kept slipping between English and Hindi. I think he was feeling magic—potions don’t do well with muggles, you know… Dad was out in the hall shouting at the healer, because they wouldn’t let Mom in… it was just me. Just me in the room. I didn’t understand…”

“What happened?” Harry whispered, almost afraid to find out, but too scared to not know.

Hector turned his head, his gold-flecked hazel eyes seeking out Harry’s. “He’d gotten into my father’s potions lab, and drank everything he could before he collapsed.”

“He… he tried…”

“He succeeded. My brother killed himself. He died five minutes after I got there.” Hector let out a long sigh, and though he didn’t turn away, he was staring without seeing. “He was seventeen years old, had never known his father, had been taken from his family and his country and forced into one full of strange adults who only saw him rarely and a school full of children speaking a language he
barely understood and he talked and dressed different and his brother went to a special school while he was left behind… and I didn’t know. I only saw him on holidays. They were my favorite part of the year, because we were both free of school to go running around like two normal muggle brothers.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered, not knowing what else to say.

“He was preparing for his A-levels. He was smart—really smart—but he didn’t like school more than it gave him something to do, didn’t know what he wanted to be except not a doctor. He would have gotten in, but he would have never gone to Oxford, not if they paid his way ten times over. He thought about going back to Delhi to live with our grandmother and teach English, but he spoke Hindi at a child’s level and he’d have to deal with his grandfather trying to push him towards politics, and he’d just be the outsider again. He told me there was boy he thought he fancied at his new school, but he didn’t think it would be worth the effort or the upset to find out if he was queer. He wasn’t even an adult, by muggle standards…”

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered again, as Hector drifted off. He passed back the photo, with one last glance at the boy, Raj, grinning with his arm over Hector’s shoulders. He wouldn’t have looked at him and seen pain or isolation like what he must of felt to do… that.

“I don’t like to talk about him,” Hector said. “It makes me feel… like I’m still sitting there, the only one listening to Raj babble to his death while my dad yelled at a healer about legal things. Holidays now… there’s a lot of silence in the house. And when I think about Raj, I think about my mother, stuck there while my father took her dying son to St. Mungo’s, because that was the only hope, and never saw him again. And I think of Raj’s grandfather, who told her that it was her fault, and that Raj had committed a crime against the gods, and that his spirit would never find rest.”

“That’s horrible. He—that’s a horrible thing to say.”

“It’s what he believes.” Hector sighed, and slowly put the photo back behind the one of his parents, sliding them both back into the frame. “I try not to think about Raj, but I see things everywhere. Little signs that people are hurting—if someone starts crying over a grade, my mind fills in a whole tragedy, on and on with details that can’t possibly come true. Pandora can set me straight, but…”

“Is that why you tutor the fifth years?” Harry asked. He’d seen Hector plenty of times down in the common room, Crouch, Wesley, Stratton, and Preston peppering him with questions that he knew Hector shouldn’t have the time to answer, not with eight NEWT classes to keep up with already.

“And the revision group?”

“No… I… Maybe.” Hesitating, Hector reached out, but his hand halted several inches from Harry’s bare forearm, to Harry’s relief. “You didn’t… you would tell me? You promise?”

“Yes.” Harry didn’t even need to think about that. “Honestly, that—I know it looks horrible, but I didn’t even think about it looking like… like that sort of scar. It was actually my—a friend, who pointed it out.”

By a “friend”, he meant the gang of muggle boys back in his relative’s neighborhood, who’d taken special glee in thinking they had something so emotional to torment Harry with. But he wasn’t sure how they’d found out, and since he couldn’t even remember his name…

At last even the short distance separating Hector’s hand from Harry’s arm was too much for Harry to tolerate. He straightened up, climbing to his feet. “Alright?” he asked Hector.

“Alright,” Hector agreed. Then they both turned away and went about their usual nightly routines,
and if the usually comfortable silence between them seemed unusually loud, neither of them broke it.

The first class with Quora was one of the strangest experiences of Harry’s life.

It wasn’t that Quora was a particularly bad teacher, because he wasn’t. He was certainly better than Burke had been. The only trouble was that this was—was—was Quora teaching, and damn it, while Harry wasn’t able to think the name he still knew what Quora was, and once the idea of him teaching children ceased being amusing it was downright terrifying.

But he was a good teacher.

Classes resumed on Wednesday the fifth, which meant that Harry only had Runes before he was faced with Defense, and Runes had been hectic enough, as he for the first time was struggling to keep up with Professor Notaro’s lecture. The other students were excited as they made their way to the Defense classroom, Severus even going so far as to fall in step with Harry and trying to ask him what their new Professor was like.

Harry didn’t answer him. Not when it was his fault Harry had ended up unable to tell anyone that Quora was—was—

They travelled the halls in silence, when Severus realized Harry had no interest in speaking to him, but sat together when they came into the classroom. That was rather out of the ordinary. Normally Severus sat with Rosier in defense, and Harry just took whatever seat he fancied, as the room was arranged with two-seat tables and Hector and Pandora always sat together. But Severus no doubt wished to take advantage of Harry’s position with the new Professor, so they sat together at the second desk on the left.

Quora sat at his desk, watching them. He nodded to Harry as he sat down, and Harry, gritting his teeth, took out his books.

The classroom was filled with quiet murmuring until the bell rang, at which point Quora stood up, came around his desk, and waited for silence. Despite his balding appearance, he was still a presence that commanded attention, and nowhere other than McGonagall’s classroom did Harry remember a teacher being able to take control of the room without a word.

“Good morning,” he said fluidly, his face curiously blank of expression at he regarded them. “As you are all well aware, I am Timothy Quora, your Defense professor for the remainder of the year. I have been brought in because your educators in this field have been sorely remiss in providing an education that meets the standards expected of NEWT-educated individuals. That you have achieved the ‘Exceeds Expectations’ mark on your OWLs is commendable. However, having reviewed Mr. Burke’s and your previous instructors’ files, I doubt that half of you will achieve passing NEWTs.”

His proclamation was met with silence. There were only sixteen students in the class to begin with, out of the thirty-six in their year, despite it being a core subject and the times troubled. Harry could practically feel Cat Sanchez gripping her quill tighter, determined to be one of the lucky eight.

“As there is no use in me teaching students who are set to fail, I will be doing everything within my purview to catch you up to where you ought to be. This means your workload will be doubled—excuse me. I will be doubling the workload you might have expected from a competent teacher, not
the scattered assignments Mr. Burke left you with. Before the Easter Holiday, you will be given another exam, the results of which will determine your continued enrollment in this course.” He leveled them a dull stare, the out-of-place steely blue eyes flicking across their faces in an almost bored manner. “I expect that at least four of you will not reach the end of the year. If you would prefer to save us all the trouble and leave now, you are aware of the location of the door.”

He turned around and waved his wand vaguely at the board. Harry could feel the spell keenly, and knew that the man did not need to turn to control the spell, choosing to do so only to make it clear he truly did not care if any of them left. Harry was… sorely tempted, but he could not rationalize the choice. He knew, vaguely, that Defense had always been his favorite subject, and that the teachers he’d learned the most from had been questionable… And he did not need to anger Quora further. Not until he had a plan.

On the board, the chalk was writing in tall, narrow print, heading the board: TACTICS. Quora rounded his desk and surveyed them with his hands on the back of his chair. “We will be discussing how to implement what you should have learned in this course so far. A basic query. You find yourself abruptly in danger. What is your first course of action?”

The students glanced at each other. Harry thought he’d had a lesson like this, as a number of answers popped into his head automatically, but rather than voice any of them he simply set about taking notes as he might have before—before he started his research: word for word. It was a long moment before anyone responded, but Quora seemed inclined to wait until the bell if he had to. At long last Remus raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr…?”

“Lupin, sir.”

“Mr. Lupin, then. What would you do?”

“Figure out what the danger is.”

One side of Quora’s mouth quirked up, which might have been a smile if Harry hadn’t already seen him smile more naturally and if it had reached his eyes. He flicked his wand again towards the board, letting the chalk spell out: IDENTIFY. Around them, the other students shifted, relaxing a bit. The only Slytherin girl in the class, the quidditch captain, raised her hand.

“Miss…?”

“Lucinda Talkalot, sir. I would notify the aurors, or building security, if there were any, or anyone around me.”

Quora raised an eyebrow, but the chalk dutifully wrote: BACK-UP. Not ‘inform authorities’, of course; Harry doubted he was ever in the sort danger where informing the authorities would help.

“Before that? Yes, Mr…?”

“Evan Rosier. Determine whether I could deal with it on my own.”

EVALUATE. A vague hand wave called on James.

“James Potter. Look to see if anyone else needs help.”

ASSIST.
“And how, exactly, do you plan to help them? Yes?”

“Lily Evans, and either cast a general protective spell like protego, or a simple ward, or a situation appropriate defensive spell over them.”

DEFEND.

“And if you’re alone? Yes, Mr.…”

“Sirius Black. Cast a defense over myself.”

That earned another raised brow, but the chalk just underlined defense, earning a wary chuckle from the other students. No one else went to raise their hands.

“You are missing a key point here,” Quora told them after a minute, crossing his arms and drumming his fingers against his black robes. Harry wondered if it were an intentional act, or a habit. The bastard was clearly a good enough actor to have gotten this far, but trying to keep the persona and the real person straight in his mind was going to be difficult. Especially since he couldn’t connect them in his mind, at least by name, despite knowing they were one and the same… “Mr. Harrigan? You appear to have had a thought, if that expression is anything to go by. What would another course of action be?”

Harry flushed at the second tittering of laughter, glancing down at his page, where his notes had drifted away from the discussion and filled in more options. He supposed most of his ideas fell into the categories already listed on the board, but there was one that really was quite obvious, at least to him. “Run, sir,” he mumbled, just loud enough to hear.

When he glanced up, the chalk had written it as ‘AVOID’.

“That’s not using what we’ve learned in class,” James scoffed.

“And it’s a coward’s move,” Sirius added.

“Hands, Mr. Potter, Mr. Black, or I am informed that I may take points, whatever good that does,” Quora said sternly—or, at least, it sounded stern, but not much different from how he had voiced anything else, so it rather bored, too. He seemed to communicate his emotions, if you could call them that, in body language rather than tone of voice. With another flick of his wand, BACK-UP was erased and rewritten at the bottom, and it, ASSIST, DEFEND, and AVOID all had dashes put in front of them. “To address your concern, avoiding danger would certainly be as appropriate a response as any of these three, following identifying and evaluating the threat and determining to what capacity you are able, necessary, responsible, and-or willing to deal with the threat. As for cowardly—is it more cowardly to remove yourself from a danger you cannot conquer, or to lie and pretend that you have a chance? Admitting weakness takes more strength, I think you will find, Mr. Black.”

He waited until the renewed tittering died out to go on. Even Harry could admire how skillfully he played his crowd, coaxing them into laughter then unsettling them with his own emotional detachment. “Another option you missed was attack.” The chalk wrote it out at the bottom of the list, the sound echoing around the still room. “The best defense is a strong offense. However, I doubt that any of you are capable enough for that to be a reasonable option against any serious threat, and so in this context the omission is acceptable.”

He looked out over them pensively. Harry wasn’t sure if it was only him who found the silence stifling. The others might have found it profound, or awkward, but to Harry it was as though Quora
was flexing his power over them, holding their attentions and—as he had demonstrated by calling on Harry—calling them out if their focus swayed.

“In this class, we will focus on these responses. You should have learned identification of dark creatures and common threats in your first through third years, as well as basic hexes and counter-curses in your fourth and fifth. As your education has been an, ah, shall we say, bricolage of your various instructors’ expertise, I expect that we will identify gaps as we go along. These are tolerable, as they have been out of your hands, so do not think that the additional independent assignments you will receive to overcome them as punishment so much as necessary.”

Harry watched as several of his classmates deflated somewhat at the promise of additional assignments, though no one let loose any audible groans. The quirk returned to Quora’s lips for a moment. He may have told them it wasn’t punishment, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t take pleasure from the pain it would cause them, apparently.

“You only have four hours of class time with me per week, and only five and a half months for me to catch you up to where you should be. As such, we will be making the most of that time. I will be reserving evening office hours for the fifth through seventh years. If you fall behind, the class will keep moving, and I expect you to catch up on your own. If you wish to regain points for classwork, you will attend those office hours and demonstrate mastery of the previously failed subject. Your NEWTs will, ultimately, be the marks that matter, but if you are seeking to pursue a summer internship, or to apply to a job before you have completed your NEWTs, your classroom grades need to be maintained.”

That confused several of the students, and Cat raised her hand. “I was under the impression that you cannot even apply to positions within the ministry without having completed the appropriate NEWTs, sir.”

“If you have the luxury to spend two to four months doing nothing following your graduation, then by all means, wait. However, the most of you will want to take a more aggressive approach, to secure your desired position before your lazier competition even arrives. You will want to begin making contacts now, and applying to open ministry roles over the winter holidays next year. If you are wise, you will seek out employment this summer.” He swept his eyes over them in a surveying glance. “Now. Are you ready to begin earning your way forward?”

His lecture concluded, Quora had the students remove their bags to a row of hooks that ran along the back row. Harry didn’t remember them ever being there before, but no one else commented, so he packed away his things as quietly as he could and moved out of the way. It took but a moment for the Professor to clear the desks, stacking them along the sides of the walls with a flick of his wand, and then they were sent to stand in two lines, partnered with the student opposite them, and ordered to exchange stinging hexes for shield charms, alternating back and forth.

The challenge there soon became apparent: their standard protego not only blocked the spell but sent it ricocheting away, and not always straight back. Soon the space between them was filled with twenty some balls of white light bouncing about so haphazardly no one dared cast, and it became a veritable ping pong game trying to put up a shield fast enough.

To Harry, arm still sore from where the null ward had broken, it was hell. When it became clear that his partner, Kirke, wasn’t going to be completing his turn in sending a hex over any time soon, Harry crouched down, letting at least three of the hexes sail overhead and into the wall, where they sizzled out. A few more ended when they struck those too slow on their defenses, but it was ultimately Lily who ended the chaos with an impressively commanded finite maximus.

Quora, leaning against the front of his desk again with his arms crossed, met their pleading gazes
with a blank expression. "Summarize. Mr. Floyd."

"Ricocheting spells are going to get us killed?" the Hufflepuff said wearily, rubbing his left shoulder.

"Indeed. And to prevent that? Mr. Rosier."

"Don't use protego in a firefight."

"Is that a definite rule?"

Rosier tilted his head in quiet consideration for a moment. Harry didn’t know much about Rosier, except that he was Severus’s friend, and on the list of Death Eaters he had written himself.

"No," he decided, though he didn’t elaborate.

Quora looked around for a better answer. "Mr. Snape."

"I suppose if you're the odd man out," he said. "If you're on your own in a fight, creating some extra chaos might be... Beneficial."

Quora nodded. "When else. Ms. Evans."

"When you don't know what you are dealing with," she said. "If there's ten spells coming at you and you don't know what they all are, a strong protego is going to do a lot more for you than trying to figure out the appropriate counter curse for each one, or a different type of shield that doesn't ricochet but let's others through."

"Correct," said Quora. "In the event that you are not the, ah, odd man out, what are some other defenses you might use. Mr. Smithe."

"Obdermus."

"A skin hardening spell? Interesting thought. As a back-up, yes. But it would have a limited scope as a defense against physical attacks, and could only shield against minor hexes. What else—Ms. Ezra."

"Repello."

"Yes. Same trouble as protego, in that it does not end the spell, merely redirects it around the field of repulsion. Ms. Evans, I believe you had the solution there."

"Finite?"

"Indeed. More. Mr. Floyd, you haven’t said anything."

"... Salvio hexia, if you have time for it."

"And to pair with that, Mr. Kirke?"

"Er. Fianto duri? Sir?"

"Mr. Burke did instruct you on basic warding, then."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Mr. Pettigrew, another."

Pettigrew looked startled at having been called on. “Ummm. Inimicum?”
“That is a modifier, Mr. Pettigrew. It works with a fair number of protective spells, but on its own is useless. Mr. Lupin, an example of a pairing, if you please.”

“Repello inimicum. Or cave inimicum.”

“Good. Ms. Lee, another defensive spell. Or technique, if you cannot name one specifically. Think beyond shields.”

“There’s counter curses, for specific spells, if you know them well enough.”

“True enough. An example?”

“Um… locomotor genus?”

“Ah. A necessity, I imagine, in a school. More options—Mr. Potter.”

“Transfiguration to create cover.”

At that Quora actually smiled—not the one-sided lip quirk, but a wolfish thing that could have also been a grimace. “Cover, yes. But while we are on the topic of transfiguration—ah, Mr. Snape, I expect you would have a more direct alternative.”

“Transmutation, sir,” Severus said without missing a beat.

“Describe.”

“Barriers that change physical attacks from something harmful to something harmless, like an aguamenti being turned to ice as it passed through, forming a physical shield, or a knife being turned to dust. There are… certain spells that will redirect the magical energy back, or convert it to strengthen a secondary layer—”

“Dark spells,” Sirius scoffed from across the room.

“Not all of them, Mr. Black, and as I warned earlier: that’s a point from Gryffindor for talking out of turn. Perhaps you’d like to give us another example?”

Sirius scowled for a moment, but he seemed to have caught on to the fact that Quora had no qualms waiting for as long as it took to get an answer. “‘The best defense is a good offense’, you said,” he finally answered. “If you make it so they can’t cast—a petrificus totalus or, um, stupefy, incarcerous, or confundus—something along those lines.”

“If you have the advantage, yes, disarmament can prevent an unnecessary battle. I would not call those specific spells offense, per se—that would essentially be the option of ‘be the stronger duelist’—but your point stands. Alternatively, a well-placed expelliarmus will render most wizards useless, as few bother with the necessary preparations to protect themselves from disarming. Drawbacks—yes, Ms. Sanchez.”

“It doesn’t actually protect you from anything, so if there’s a hex coming you’d still be hit.”

“Precisely. And the answer to that, Mr. Harrigan?”

Harry barely managed not to roll his eyes. Why was he getting stuck with the practical responses? It would only give Sirius more reason to believe he was a Slytherin in all but name. No matter…

“Duck.”

“Indeed.”
Across the room, Pettigrew elbowed James to whisper something in his ear. Quora, with barely a flick of his wrist, sent a stinging hex their way—James saw it and jumped aside, into Sirius, but Pettigrew got his right in the chest, making him yelp.

“As Mr. Harrigan said, Mr. Pettigrew. Duck.”

His comment earned him another round of quiet laughter, and even James managed a smile, though Pettigrew looked mortified and Sirius had indeed taken advantage of the chance to glare at Harry. But Quora was quick enough to direct them to their new task: a game not unlike dodgeball, in which every student could cast only three stinging hexes and three protegos, and once hit they were ‘out’. It was easy enough for everyone to get into, and with Severus on one side and the marauders on the other it was quite the competition, but for obvious reasons Harry couldn’t quite lose himself to the game the way the others did. He fired off two of his stupefies right at the start and then crouched down as though he were out, using one of his protegos against a wayward spell but otherwise letting them fly overhead, he kept an eye on Quora, who was watching them and calling out whenever a student was ‘out’ or used more than their allotted spells.

Between the dodging skills of Severus, who had years of experience from going one-on-two against James and Sirius, Jacquelyn Lee, the quidditch captain for Ravenclaw, and Lucinda Talkalot, the captain for Slytherin, the game ended and his side ‘won’ three-to-two without Harry having to join back in, which was lucky because otherwise Quora would have called him out and the Gryffindors would have raised a stink. After that, Quora spread them out a bit more, and they practiced dodging without shields or the game. It was enjoyable enough—Kirke, where he lacked in power, had either impeccable or terrible aim, as Harry had to perform acrobatics like he might have in the most bludger-heavy quidditch game—

Again with the quidditch metaphors, he thought grimly, yelping when a stinging hex caught his hand.

As their two hour block drew to a close (and their enthusiasm began to wane as they grew tired and hungry for lunch), Quora called their attention again to the front. With a lazy wave of his wand, a stack of parchment flew up and distributed itself out to the class: half-empty charts with four spells listed on the left and space for writing on the right.

“By Friday, you should have these filled out referencing not only your textbook, but other sources from the library. I expect each item to have the effects, appropriate uses, drawbacks, and any other pertinent information to know when using the spell in action. Those of you with stars beside one of the spells, you will be presenting your findings and demonstrating in class on Friday, so do practice. You may wish to come to office hours this afternoon or tomorrow, if you are having trouble with it.” The bell began to ring, but no one dared turn away from the Professor, who clearly had more to say. “I understand that you covered chapter seven at the end of last term. Review it for Friday, and yes, there will be a quiz.”

The class groaned, but Quora waved his hand as if to shoo them away—but before Harry could join the mass movement towards the door he made the mistake of meeting Quora’s eyes. “Mr. Harrigan, if you would stay a minute.”

Harry nodded, then turned and ducked his head a bit to let out the unhappy noise he’d been holding in for the whole of the class. Severus shot him a look, but it was his fault Harry was in this mess—well, it wasn’t really, it was Quora’s, but Severus really hadn’t been any help at all, so Harry returned with his best glare as he gathered his bag off the hook. As the other students hurried out, they conversed in hushed tones, but they seemed energized with a certain excitement among them, and an anticipation of lunch, which for teenagers was always a good thing.
Harry, on the other hand, made his way slowly to the front, where Quora was gathering the papers remaining on his desk into a black folio. If he noticed Harry’s lack of enthusiasm, he didn’t care to respond to it. “I have determined that you will be assisting me during the second year classes Tuesday afternoon, from one thirty to three thirty, the fourth year classes at the same time on Fridays, and during office hour Monday evening, at five thirty. Alongside that, we shall say five hours Saturday afternoons, between lunch and dinner, one thirty to six thirty.”

Harry nodded, calculating the hours that would cut from his schedule. Ten, as Quora had said. No way he could protest the chunk of his Saturday, then, though Harry couldn’t imagine what Quora could possibly intend to fill that time with. Nothing good.

“For this week, as we did not have class Monday or Tuesday, you will come tomorrow afternoon, from three thirty to four thirty, to assist in supervising a fifth year exam. As you do not have class when they are scheduled with me, I may change your hours to assist in mock exams for the OWLs later on during the term. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Quora glanced up at his listless voice, and chuckled lightly, though it didn’t sound exactly in good humor. “Don’t look so put out, Mr. Harrigan. You will only be teaching four hours a week, and I hardly expect my office hours will be busy, except before exams. You will be permitted to work on your own homework if there are no students needing help. On the homework for my class, of course.”

“Yes, sir.”

Quora frowned, snapping the buckle to hold the folio closed in his hand without taking his eyes from Harry’s face. Harry, for his part, stared very pointedly at the silver clasp holding the professor’s robes shut under his chin, and did his best not to flinch. "In addition, there is a staff meeting at five thirty next Friday, which you will be in attendance for."

"Yes, sir."

The passing period bell rang, and this time Harry really did jump.

“I think I preferred your letters, insulting as they were,” Quora said lowly when the tolling stopped. Harry didn’t know what to say to that, or if he was supposed to, and the Professor let out an impatient huff. “Well? Don’t you have lunch? It might put some life in you.”

Harry nodded and turned to hurry out, not even bothering to pretend he wasn't running away. Behind him, Quora summoned some magic for a spell, and while it was simply a levitation to lift the desks back into their proper place, it filled Harry with panic to be surrounded by it. Whatever cold grip he had on his heart through the class, it was gone now.

But as he sped out the door into the hall, still half full of students milling about on their way down to the Great Hall, senses still trapped on that man’s awful magic, his panic came to a head as someone grabbed him by the the collar of the back of his robes and pulled him out of the main path—

“Five points to Ravenclaw for demonstrating what we learned in class.”

Harry stumbled into the wall of what looked to be a broom cupboard and spun about, finding Sirius standing in the door, grey eyes lit with an unpleasant gleam. Harry hurried to swallow his heart back down from where it was fluttering in his throat. “What?”

“Running away.”
Harry rolled his eyes. He’d known raising that point was going to come back to bite him. Sirius was nothing if not predictable. “And that makes you my knight in shining armour, does it? I must admit, I’d expect a few more candles, a glass of wine, but this is so romantic, really.”

“You were running away. From that Professor Quora. Why?”

“Oh, Sirius,” Harry said, pitch soaring with sarcasm. “I didn’t know you cared.”

“What did you call me?”

Harry blinked slowly as Sirius bristled with irritation, drawing closer. Maybe sarcasm wasn’t the best way to go when he was cornered in a broom cupboard with a very volatile Gryffindor who was at least a foot taller than him. He wasn’t entirely sure why he had said ‘Sirius’ rather than ‘Black’ anyhow, only that it was how he’d thought of the other boy since before they’d ever spoken, meaning it was probably something he shouldn’t think too hard about. Meanwhile, he needed an excuse… “Oh, I—I’m sorry. I didn’t think you wanted to be associated with the Blacks. Seeing as you left the family, and all that.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “I don’t,” he agreed. “But that doesn’t mean you can just call me by my first name.”

“Alright,” said Harry, drawing out the word. “I can’t call you by your first name, and your family name isn’t your family name anymore, so what should I call you? Honorary Potter?”

“Nothing. You shouldn’t—why were you running from Quora?”

“Why do you care?” Harry asked. “So you can make fun of me for it?”

Sirius took another step closer, and Harry pressed back into the brooms. “I think you know exactly who any decent person should be watching out for. I think that you know something about Quora in relation to the Death Eaters—” he spat the words, as usual “—that frightens you, and you’re going to tell me about it.”

“Are you saying I’m a decent person?” Harry asked in mock surprise. His heart was pounding, feeling about ready to jump up out his throat, but he wouldn’t give Sirius the satisfaction of seeing that.

“No, I—what?”

“If I think that and I’m running away, then I guess I’m a decent person, in your books.”

Sirius’s brow furrowed. “What the fuck have you been smoking, Harridan?” he asked.

“Harri gan.”

“I’ll call you what I want.”

“I mean, yeah, but it’s not even clever. It’s just wrong.”

“Shut up. You aren’t a decent person at all, you’re a coward. The worst.”

“Right,” said Harry. “So says the guy who’s got to throw me into a broom cupboard in order to even ask a simple question. Real brave, that.”

“Answer me!” Sirius snarled, and his hand began to move towards his wand. Harry eyed him, but didn’t dare move when he was doubtlessly at the disadvantage, so he spoke quickly.
“He’s the bloody defense professor. Dumbledore hired him. Do you really think Dumbledore would hire someone suspicious?”

“He hired Burke, didn’t he? And O’Michael."

“O’Michael?”

“Second year. Tried to get a bunch of seventh years to do a Dark Arts ritual out in the forest,” Sirius spat, sour look returning. “If Quora’s not suspicious, why were you running out of the room, then? Come to think of it, why were you held back? He want to congratulate you on your run, duck, and hide battle strategy?”

“If you must know, I’ve been bullied into being his TA.”

“Dumbledore said, but I didn’t believe…” Sirius barked out a laugh. “You look about ready to piss yourself when you get called on in class, how are you supposed to be any use actually teaching?”

“You know me so well,” Harry said airily. “And I’m only helping with the the younger years, otherwise I’m just stuck grading homework…” At that Sirius’s eyes widened a bit, and Harry sighed. "The kids homework, Si—Not-Potter."

"Don't call me that," Sirius replied.

"You're basically asking me to think up some shitty nickname, you realize. If I call you by your real name, it's too familiar, but if I call you by a fake one, you'll just take it as proof that I'm some horrible person. Never mind that you've still got me cornered in a broom closet, and if that hasn't hit the gossip mill yet, well, wow.”

Sirius jumped back and actually glanced over his shoulder, giving Harry just enough time to catch his breath. There was no one left in the hall by now. If there had been, he might have gotten their attention to get him out of this mess.

“Can I go now?” he asked. "Or were you planning on hexing me? If you are, hurry it up. I'm hungry."

Sirius swung his head back around, glaring at him. "Stay away from my brother! " he growled, and stomped away, slamming the closet door shut behind him and leaving Harry blinking in the momentary dark.

What did Regulus have to do with anything? Sirius Black made absolutely no sense at all. Harry knew he was at least moderately intelligent, and an extremely talented spell caster and dueler, but he sure didn't show it. Harry wasn't even sure why he gave the Gryffindor so much of his time. Was it a hidden memory thing, or should he be doing some self-serving to examine his feelings towards him...

Urk. Harry hoped it was a memory thing, because aside from his roundabout attempts at protecting Regulus, he couldn't think of a single redeemable quality in Sirius Black.

Well, he had nice hair, Harry supposed, but not as nice as—but his hair wasn’t a quality in him, so it didn’t matter, anyways. And Harry didn’t want to parse what it meant that Sirius’s hair came to mind as a redeeming quality, so he shook his head and inched towards the door, arms outstretched as he tried to use the traces of magic in the walls and items that filled to navigate. He ended up knocking down then tripping over a broom, losing his glasses on the way, so it wasn’t an entirely successful attempt, but his face landed inches from the narrow strip of light that was the crack under the thick door.
Sighing, he patted about until he felt his glasses, which he found just in time to hear a door opening and footsteps in the hallway outside. Almost without thinking about it he shoved them on his face and tilted his head to watch the shoes go by the crack under the door—but before they did he was hit by the sense of Quora’s magic. Harry froze. He really didn’t want Quora of all people to discover him on the floor of a broom cupboard. But then again… if his theory was right, and it was his magic brushing others’ that allowed him to sense them, then restrained as Quora’s magic was in the school he shouldn’t be able to notice Harry at all…

He held his breath and watched as the two dark shoes and the bottom of Quora’s robes move swiftly by. They were gone again in an instant; the rhythm of his steps unfaltering as it faded away. Harry sighed and sat up, wrestling his focus back to the magic in the closet, away from the unlikely professor’s magnetic grasp. He ran his hands along the door until he found the handle, and slowly used it to pull himself up. Taking another moment to determine that the hallway was truly empty at this point, he let himself out, blinking at the light, and quickly hurried away, following the side stairs down towards the kitchens, rather than risking the Great Hall without his ward to dull the onslaught of magic.

Quora couldn’t sense him, he thought with a sense of tentative glee. If Harry needed to hide, he could. Powerful as the bastard was, he was constrained by the disguise he wore. Letting loose the beginnings of a smile, Harry tucked that bit of information away in the same well-guarded place where he knew he had some skill resisting the imperius, and dared let the sliver of hope take root in his mind.
“Harry,” Professor Dumbledore said warmly, setting his quill (a peacock feather that swooped dramatically with the movement) aside and standing from his seat behind his desk. “Come in, come in. Can I offer you a cup of tea?”

It was Friday afternoon. Quora had been at Hogwarts for seven days, and while his homework-intense teaching style and Harry’s enlistment as his assistant were taking their turn on the gossip wheel, Harry hadn’t heard any suspicions that the new Professor was anyone out of the ordinary. When Harry had helped supervise the mock OWL Quora sprung on the fifth years that afternoon, the students had been more concerned with his villainy as a teacher than anything else. And having seen the man in action in his own class, it didn’t seem likely that the so-called professor was going to make any amateur mistakes.

Still, seeing as Harry was himself incapable of saying anything to raise the alarm, when the Headmaster stopped by the Ravenclaw table at lunch and asked if Harry had a free hour that afternoon, Harry couldn’t help but feel hopeful that Dumbledore wasn’t completely ignorant—and terrified what would happen when he couldn’t give the Headmaster answers. Especially since when Harry had mentioned he was helping Quora with the fifth year class, Dumbledore had gone directly to the defense professor to ask if he could be spared half an hour early. The look Quora had given as he left the classroom had held a warning anyone with an ounce of self-preservation would heed.

Harry had never been good at self-preservation.

“Yes, please,” said Harry as he closed the door. Glancing around the office, he tried not to let his eyes dart about too obviously, though if they lingered too long on the portraits of previous headmasters looking down at him with unabashed interest, none commented. He tried not to slouch or stand too straight as he crossed the office, and aimed to present himself as being vaguely curious in Dumbledore’s collection of bizarre magical instruments. As such, he tripped on the first stair up towards the desk.

Dumbledore conjured a blue, red, and purple plaid armchair, which Harry fell into gratefully. His misstep went unmentioned, but Harry felt his face lighting with a blush of embarrassment. Perhaps it was merely the difference in their ages, but Harry always feel like a child in Dumbledore’s presence. Or maybe it was his guilt over his previous failures that made his clumsiness seem like an unfortunate reflection of the gracelessness with which he had handled himself since turning seventeen. He sunk into the overly plush cushions, and had to stretch to accept the teacup that appeared in front of him at the desk.

“I hope the holiday treated you well?” Dumbledore said as he tucked his wand away and sat back down. He spooned an alarming count of sugar cubes into his cup, offering the bowl to Harry with a gesture and a raised brow when he was done.

“No, thank you,” Harry replied, and couldn’t help but pull his own cup a bit closer to his chest as
Dumbledore added one last cube to his own before pushing the little dish off to the side of his desk. His cup must have been filled with syrup, if all of that had dissolved, Harry thought. “The holiday was… relaxing, thank you. And yours?”

A lie if he’d ever told one, what with the initial pile up of work, forays into dangerous mind magics, and threat of the Dark Lord hanging over his head, but he wasn’t about to complain to Dumbledore about any of those.

“Relaxing?” The Headmaster chuckled. “Well, I suppose you could say that. I don’t suppose you’ve been reading the Prophet lately?”

“No since last term,” Harry admitted.

“Then I suppose you haven’t heard? The Heads of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes have gotten their Use of Magic bill passed.”

Harry blinked. “The one that failed last summer and got the guy—um…”

“The very same,” Dumbledore agreed, as before not mentioning Harry’s blunder. It wasn’t exactly polite to casually refer to other people's’ violent ends, Harry suspected, though he never claimed to have much tact.

“Oh,” he said.

“Do you know what the bill entails?”

“It was the self-defense one, right? Er, self-defense against the Statute, I mean. Loosening obliviation laws, and all that.” It had been before Halloween that he’d last paid any attention to the Wizengamot’s circular arguments.

“In the roughest sense.” Dumbledore tilted his chin down a bit, to look at Harry over his crescent-moon shaped glasses. “In truth, it would be fair to say that the particular details of the bill do not much matter. More important is that there is a bill at all.” When he saw Harry frown, he amended: “Passing the bill is, essentially, the Wizengamot making a statement that there is a problem to be dealt with. Considering the Minister and the former head of the D.M.A.C. were so intently working towards burying the Ministry’s proverbial head in the sand…”

“Oh,” said Harry again, staring into his cup. “I see what you mean. That’s… bold.”

“And necessary, I should think. Mr. Crouch and Madame Bagnold have toppled the Minister’s illusion.” The man took a sip of his sugary tea, keeping his voice light, as though they were discussing the gossip columns rather than the political stirrings that both of them knew would escalate the war. “And now that the D.M.A.C. is out of the Minister’s undiscerning grasp, it will be Madame Bagnold who regulates the Ministry’s more propagandistic efforts, and she is a trifle more realistic than her forerunner, if I may say so myself.”

Harry blinked. “The… Department of Accidents and Catastrophes puts out propaganda?” He thought Severus might have explained that to him before, but the memory was, like many, difficult to interpret, with all the holes in it.

“In a manner of speaking. Their charter grants them jurisdiction of the management of any sort of crisis the wizarding world faces, which for the most part has to do with the flow of information. I imagine you think first of their obliviators? That is within their general purview, but so is preventing the general populace to falling into a panic. And I guarantee that those of us who have been through such unrest before would not hesitate to classify it as a catastrophe of the most extreme measure.”
“The war will be beginning soon, then,” Harry said, hesitant and glum. Things seemed bad enough without an open conflict to deal with.

“Beginning? My dear boy, the war has already begun.” Dumbledore studied him, and Harry thought he saw pity written on the creased old face before he looked away, not daring to meet those watery blue eyes for long. “The minister may refuse to acknowledge it, but the troops on either side have been gathered and acting accordingly for years. It’s merely the announcement that has yet to come, and the announcement will spell the end of the Minister. He is a peacetime governor, and a poor one at that.”

Harry shifted in his seat, trying unsuccessfully to lift from the cushions’ attempts to swallow him. He doubted Dumbledore would talk so openly about politics with any other students, and it made him nervous—not least of all in light of Quora’s objectives…

“An open war, I meant,” he clarified, not entirely willing to let himself be patronized. But rather than get into that, he did his best to cut off whatever game Dumbledore was trying to trap him in. “May I ask why you called me here? I mean, not to be rude, sir, but you know as well as I do that I’m neutral in this conflict for a good reason. And I’m not exactly comfortable getting into political conversations—with you of all people, sir…”

Dumbledore set down his teacup and folded his hands in his lap. “Of course. I don’t mean to get involved in something you aren’t willing to be a part of. But, tell me, have you made any progress in your research? It’s been some time since we’ve spoken. A whole term, in fact.”

“I’m trying to explore a new direction. There’s supposed to be some more materials coming for me from the OMRL, though it hasn’t come through yet.”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore. His voice seemed queerly flat. Not quite cold, but not his usual mild-mannered tone, either, and Harry found himself glancing over the desk through his lashes and reassuring himself that the Headmaster’s magic was still in check. “I have heard that they are considering asking you back again this coming summer, as an employee, rather than a student researcher.”

“Really?” Harry said, caught off guard by the news. Of course, he had considered writing to ask to continue his work there if he hadn’t had success by summer, but he hadn’t expected them to come to him. “That would be… probably better than any other option I’ve got, at this point. Unless you’ve heard of anyone else developing time magic.”

Dumbledore chuckled softly. “Would that your task were that easy,” he mused. “I am impressed that you haven’t given up yet.”

Harry blinked. “Sir?”

“I have seen many students take on many tasks in my long years here, Harry. It is only a matter of fact that most give up before their projects reach their full potential. I’m afraid you might be on the opposite end of that spectrum.”

“Well, I’m definitely not giving up…”

Harry trailed off, unnerved by Dumbledore’s smile. It didn’t meet his eyes at all, and Harry didn’t know the Professor well enough to say for certain, but it seemed out of character for the Headmaster to encourage Harry to just, well, give up. That’s what he was doing, wasn’t it?

“You mentioned a ‘new direction’?” Dumbledore prompted.
“Uh, yeah,” said Harry. He tried to swallow his nerves; it would be good to bounce his ideas off someone outside of himself, especially when that someone was the foremost wizard of Britain. “See, I got this idea… Pandora—that’s Pandora Moone, in Ravenclaw with me—she was telling me about how divination works. The, um, real type, no offense to the class or anything, but I mean—the stuff prophets and seers work with. And there’s the idea of set points—I think you were trying to explain that to me, actually, when I first showed up…? Well, anyways, there’s an idea that these set points that Prophets use could be used like landmarks for time travel. I don’t know how much literature there is on that, though; there was a journal mentioned in one of the books that I wrote to the OMRL about…”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said, and then he reached into his desk and pulled something out of the drawer—a book, unusually thick for its smaller page size, bound in blue leather, with some taller folded papers sticking out from it. “I had wondered why you would be asking for the work of Aeden Baines.”

“…is that the book I asked for?” Harry asked. Why on Earth did Dumbledore have it? Was he reading Harry’s mail? How long had he been holding it?

“I was meeting with a mutual acquaintance of ours, Gregory Spencer, over the holiday. He asked me to bring this to you directly, rather than risk sending it through the mail,” Dumbledore explained. He stretched his arm out to pass Harry the book, though Harry had to halfway stand from the armchair to accept it. “After all, Mr. Baines was known to have interviewed prophets from across Europe. Not every prophecy he has recorded has come to pass, and access to his writings is therefore considered carefully. It might prove dangerous if such sensitive information about the future ended up in the wrong hands.”

“Huh,” said Harry, though he looked down at the book with new interest. If he could identify any of the prophecies to come true in the nineties—he’d written down a date he knew to be a set point in his notes, but the actual memory of whatever incident he’d identified was gone with the rest. If he could remember others… “Why would he trust it to me, then?”

“You do rather come across as the trustworthy sort,” Dumbledore said dryly, and Harry looked up again, trying to read him. “And as it happens, that journal in particular is in need of translation, as I am to understand you have done for the library previously.”

“Oh,” said Harry, deflating a bit. Of course it couldn’t be written in plain English. “Yes, I… will have to find time for that. With the whole T.A.-ing thing, and all.”

“I was rather surprised to hear you had taken up Professor Quora’s offer,” the headmaster said.

“Severus and Slug—I mean, Professor Slughorn talked me into it,” he said glumly. “And I couldn’t exactly say no without causing a scene…”

“Do you not wish to do it? You signed the contract.”

For a moment Harry’s eyes widened, hearing in the words a subtle offer to intervene. He was tempted—sorely tempted—to ask for the headmaster to annul it—but just as quickly he shook his head. “No, it’s… I do need the money, sir. You and the school have been extremely generous, but…”

And, loathe as he was to admit it, that was the truth. There was only so many times he could sticking charm the soles of his trainers back into place before they were going to fall irreversibly apart. Just the evening before, Hani had mentioned that she would have to see if she could find a spare robe about for him, as his was getting threadbare. As for the rest of his clothes, which had been the worst
of what he had owned, even Hani’s deft needlework could only do so much.

That didn’t mean it was ideal, but…

Dumbledore gave him another queer smile. “I am pleased that you are thinking of these things, Harry, though of course you are no trouble to the school. And the experience as a Teaching Assistant will no doubt assist you in acquiring a job, if you decide not to stay on at the OMRL.”

Harry, taking a sip of his tea, spluttered gracelessly, coughing. “Er—I don’t expect it will matter much, once I return to the nineties—I probably won’t go around advertising the whole time travel thing any more than I do now—and with any luck, I won’t be here that long…”

“Harry,” Dumbledore cut him off. Gone entirely were any illusions of the bumbling half-mad and kindly old man. He looked sharper and sterner, suddenly, like his eyes were the icy embodiment of his magic, a honed weapon in the hands of a master, lightning to be borne in the hands of a god. Harry, all too recently faced with the wrath of another with that much power and resolve, paled under the potential for terrible greatness that sat before him, while Dumbledore went on without pause:

“I’m afraid you cannot remain willfully ignorant of the realities of your situation, my boy. I do not believe you will find a way home. You look to the words of seers and prophets for inspiration, so let me share with you what I know of them, from my many years experience. Prophets see fixed points, it is true, but seers see possibilities, and there are infinite realms of possible paths, and which one is walked makes all the difference in defining this world. A man may be fated to die at a certain time, no matter what, but it is how he lives until then that will shape the course of the world. Already you have irrevocably changed the world around you. It was inevitable from the start that you would. Even if you do return to the future, it will not be the future you came from. That future is gone.”

He spoke with unrivaled conviction, and for a moment, every inch of Harry trembled at the possibility that his declarations could be right. But the moment passed. He would not—could not accept Dumbledore’s declarations, no matter how impressive the delivery. He felt all the more a child, small and unlikely to be heard, and the helplessness tried to banish the air from his lungs and drown him in terror. But he would not let it. If he was a child, he was a child with a mind of his own nonetheless, and a child who had research where Dumbledore only had conjecture and a steadfast belief in his own predictions, and while it was tempting to wallow in Dumbledore’s words, instead Harry found some faint courage, and with it dislodged his small voice from his throat.

“I disagree,” he began, and if he could manage those two words, he could manage more. “No offence, Professor, but I think that’s an easy story to tell yourself. The truth of the matter is: for me, the future is certain. Whatever path I have come from, it is one where everything I’ve known has and will happen. You, you only have to think of the now and the possibilities of the future. For me, there is only one path the future can take, and when I return, it will be to that future, precisely because that is the future I came from.”

Dumbledore stared at him, considering. “Your optimism is admirable,” he said at length. “And perhaps it is easier to follow a more cynical path. Or less idealistic, I think might be a fair argument. But tell me, Harry, if there is only one future for you to return to, then what difference would it make for you to tell me anything?”

So that was what this was about. Harry took a moment to compose his words carefully. Dumbledore had far more practice in presenting false certainty, after all, and in prying open the cracks in the words of his foes, and Harry had gaps in his memory ripe to be torn apart. If those were not cracks, he did not know what was. They were also his weapon.
“Because in the future I come from, you didn’t know what I know until it happened, not any more than anyone else did,” he said at last, and he let his hope in the truth of it be his conviction. Courage and hope: a fool’s tools, but all he had. “I said that the future I know is the only one I can go back to. Until I see any sign that it is gone, I’m not going to do anything to contradict what I know to be true.”

“Then you choose to ignore the damages being done right in front of you. Based on what? A chance of a future that depends on them? Can you do that, Harry? Can you bear the weight of what may happen based on your choice to do nothing? If my prediction proves true and yours false, can you live with not having helped those you could have?”

Harry swallowed. God, Dumbledore did not do things halfway, did he? That was a punch right to the gut.

Never mind, though: Harry could be stubborn, too. “Professor, you’re forgetting that this isn’t a matter of what might happen. Everything you’re facing? For me, all of this is in the past.” While Harry couldn’t quite brave meeting Dumbledore’s eye, he stared at the golden rims of his glasses with a resolve that would have marred that soft metal, if looks could transmute strength of character into force. “And what about you, Professor? Can you live with the weight of asking someone to give up hope? Can you live with trying to take away my chances of going home?”

“I’ve asked for worse.”

For a moment, a darkness seemed to swell in a shadow across his face, and his magic simmered… but then it and all his intensity were gone.

Dumbledore picked up his tea again, and though he did not sigh he seemed old, older still than he had looked before, old and tired and chained to life by sinew and bone. "You've changed," he said, and it was not the accusation it might have been.

“So have you,” Harry replied, not relaxing just yet. It could be a trick. His heart was still pounding, anyways. “When I first came here, I didn’t think it would be possible for me to do any useful research about anything, but you assured me that there was no reason I couldn’t, even if it meant inventing an entirely new field. And now I’ve read every case study and journal I’ve been able to get my hands on. I’m not about to throw away all that.”

Dumbledore hummed, though the note that came out was not particularly cheerful, and ended with a sigh. "I admire your dedication, my boy, I really do, and I can understand what I am asking of you. But I do not ask you this because I want to. I ask because I must." He was staring at Harry, but not looking at him, not really. “There are people who look to me for guidance, and I owe it to them, having played my part in the creation of this conflict. I must look at every possible advantage we can take, in hopes that it spares one of the people who fight under my direction their life. The information that you carry could save lives.”

"Or it could get you all killed, thinking you know what will happen.” Harry shook his head. “Look —after all the research I’ve done, the only thing I’m certain of is that no one really knows what happens when you mess with time. There's no guarantee that anything I give you will change the way things are going to happen for better rather than for worse. What is certain is that if I give it to you, this will no longer be my past, and the future will no longer be my future."

Dumbledore sighed, setting down his cup. “I can see that you have made up your mind.”

Harry nodded. “I am sorry, sir. I… I really can’t risk it.”
The blue eyes flicked up to Harry’s face, and he quickly directed his attention back down to his cup. He remembered just before it reached his lips that he had coughed tea back into it, and stretched to set it back down on the desk instead, wiping a few droplets off the cover of the book. Hopefully, no one at the OMRL expected this copy back.

“Very well. I will drop the issue for now. However, I will bring it up again before you leave this summer, and I expect you to consider my request with the attention it deserves.”

“I won’t be changing my mind.”

“We will see. Is there anything else you wish to tell me, Mr. Harrigan?”

Harry blinked at the use of his full surname. Dumbledore was one of three people who knew it wasn’t his actual name, so using it seemed… pointed. He had done it before, too, when Harry had stood in his office and argued at him about the unfair treatment of Severus after James and Sirius had blatantly bullied him.

Perhaps that memory was the reason why Harry didn’t even try to discuss ‘Professor Quora’. Perhaps it was the overall tone of the meeting. Maybe it was the gaes. Either way, he shook his head.

“Very well. I expect you have a rather busy evening ahead of you, with all the work you have taken on. Good luck with your translation.”

As he fled the headmaster’s office, Harry didn’t know whether to be scared or angry. Mostly, he was trying and failing to swallow a more general irritation with the way the world seemed intent on throwing everything at him all at once. Didn’t he have enough to deal with? Within the span of a week now he had the most powerful figures on either sides of the war staking their unwanted claims on him, and Dumbledore had reminded him all too keenly of the existence-threatening task of attempting to independently research and develop an only theoretical magic into something he could use—and Dumbledore wanted him to give that up, and was thrusting more upon him?

Harry clutched tightly at the book in his hands. How dare he.

Harry was so engrossed in his irritation that he did not think before charging into the hallway filled with students flooding out of their classrooms. He was caught so off guard he did not even try to hold himself back from his mind’s automatic reaction of reaching out and identifying each and every one of them by magic alone, from trying to untangle the chaos of it all. His mind ran free, categorizing each student and teacher and moving on to the next and the next and the next. It was almost—and he’d had this thought before—almost like he was searching for something, someone, some missing—

Whatever it was, he was brought back to himself by a tap on his shoulder, and all his focus converged on the intruder. Pandora, he thought as he turned about. Not a threat. He smiled at her unsteady, and tried to focus on her soothing magic, but he didn’t seem able to get his nerves under control, and the categorization of the others began anew, even as he did his best to focus on her.

“Hey.”

"Harry." She looked at him, tilting her head, and Harry supposed that meant he wasn't convincing her of anything. "How was your tea? The Headmaster does pile in his sugar."
"Er, yeah, he does," he agreed. That seemed a safe approach to the topic. Although... "When have you had tea with Dumbledore?"

"Oh, a number of times. He courts those who have influence in circles he does not, and my father qualifies. I think he was hoping I would take the Farley seat when he came by this summer, but..."

"Why would he want..." Harry started, but he thought it might be rude to ask. He wasn't sure. It was too hard to think through social niceties when there was so much magic clamoring for his attention all around him.

"Oh, well. He hasn't got a seat himself, you know; the Dumbledores put theirs to the elect ages ago... Are you alright, Harry? You're looking a bit pale."

"A bit of a headache," he said, looking around. The hall didn't seem to be clearing, even though classes were done for the day, and he wasn't sure if it was his poor mood or something in the crowd that had him on edge, every little bit of magic shouting out at him. "It's kinda noisy in here..."

And then it all happened very quickly: a Gryffindor, a fourth year, made to hex one of his Slytherin classmates, and Harry barely had the presence to duck when the spell ricocheted his direction, but at the last moment he managed to grab Pandora, pulling her down to the floor with him, and the spell disappeared down the hall towards the classroom.

Before it was even gone, the Slytherins started throwing their own hexes, and then some of the younger students jumped in on either side, their magic flaring uncertainly, the hall filling with shrieks —

And for Harry, it was like every spell cast was a stinging hex hitting him. It took great effort to pull himself up again, and his vision spun, but in his desperation to stop it all he didn't need to see to raise his wand and pour every last bit of his power with a shout: "*Immobulus Maximus!*"

Sudden silence. The entire hallway froze. A few of the hexes still flying through the air struck their intended targets, and a Slytherin boy began grow ibex horns, slowly spiralling up towards the ceiling, but he still didn’t move.

Harry let his wand fall, glancing around warily. It was then that his eyes progressed to the other end of the hall, where the Marauders stood crowded in a doorway, free of the spell but frozen as they gaped at him. For a moment Harry just stared back, but then the drain on his magic seemed to catch up with him and he collapsed backwards into Pandora. She caught him easily.

“Merlin, Harrigan,” James called out, the first to break the silence. “You know that spell is meant for small objects, not human beings, right?”

Shit, he was right. Where had he even learned— oh, God, that made his head pound—

“I doubt he cares,” Sirius said lowly.

“If you care so much, then someone should probably get a professor down here before we find out I just did permanent damage,” Harry retorted.

“Isn’t this your job, ‘Assistant Professor’?”

“It’s ‘Teaching Assistant’, so no, actually.” Harry tried to pull away from Pandora, but she didn’t let go. In fact, she shifted Harry’s book bag off his shoulder, doubling it up over the top of her own. Probably for the best, as when he put more weight on them Harry’s legs seemed suddenly incapable of remaining rigid. Pandora eased him to slump against the wall, mostly upright, as his head spun. At
least his spell seemed to have frozen the crowd’s magic along with everything else. He probably
would have passed out if he had been trying to keep track of everyone—though exhausting himself
magically seemed to be a fairly effective method of dealing with the noise of it. “Look, Black, or one
of you—could you just—go find a Professor? Please?”

“No need, Mr. Harrigan,” a voice called from behind him. If Harry’s legs had been responding, he
would have jumped. He hadn’t noticed Quora coming. Considering who he was, his temporary
freedom from the press of magic did not seem like such a good thing…

The professor looked around the hall, watching with passive intrigue as the boy with horns finally
topped forward under the weight, not moving to help, though the boy’s eyes were darting about
frantically. He took in Harry, once again trying fruitlessly to push himself up off the wall, and
glanced over Pandora before turning to the four Gryffindors on the other end of the crowd. “What
exactly happened here?”

It was Remus who spoke up. He was the prefect here, whether he acted like it or not. “There was a
fight starting, sir,” he said. “Harrigan, um. Put a stop to it. With immobulus.”

“...Did he?” There was something that sounded like amusement, though his face did not shift. “Well,
it was effective, if a bit over-zealous. I believe the phrase is—five points to Ravenclaw? Yes. Mr.
Lupin, if you would retrieve the headmaster. Mr. Black, Professor McGonagall; Mr. Potter, Professor
Slughorn, if you please.” He paused for a moment, considering the last Marauder, but shook his
head. “You can go, Mr. Pettigrew.”

The four boys split without protest, Remus shooting Harry a concerned look as he went by. Even
Quora frowned as he turned back towards them.

“Are you ill, Mr. Harrigan?”

Harry clenched his jaw and finally forced himself upright, shaking his head—slowly. “I think I just
overdid it.”

“Overdid it?” Pandora laughed. “Harry, you just froze thirty-six people in the middle of a fight taking
place. With a spell meant for small objects. If I tried that, I’d be asleep for a month.”

“Indeed,” said Quora. He considered Harry thoughtfully, though his expression was still blank.

“‘Run’ not your chosen response this time?”

Harry flushed, but resolved not to let his anger show any further. “I did demonstrate a fairly inspired
‘duck’. Sir.”

Quora finally smiled. It did not reach his eyes. “Did you?”

Whatever the driving force of the incongruous malice behind that simple question, Harry did not find
out, as Sirius returned with McGonagall, moments before Remus and Dumbledore came up behind
them. Quora did not wait for Slughorn before explaining the situation.

“And who was it who created a statue garden out of the hallway?” McGonagall pressed. She seemed
impressed, despite her phrasing.

“Mr. Harrigan has quite an impressive control of immobulus, apparently,” Quora said.

She raised her eyebrow as she regarded him, though it was Dumbledore who spoke first. “I’m
surprised you would take such a dramatic course, Harry.”
Harry winced. The tone was light, but Harry heard the jab, loud and clear. “I probably should have just gone for an actual Professor, sir.”

“Nonsense,” Dumbledore said. “It was an effective method of crowd control. No one appears to have been hurt, thanks to your quick thinking and action. Though perhaps we should free those who were simply bystanders?”

“I’ll help you, sir,” said Pandora, drawing her wand. Together they went around, releasing those without their wands drawn, mostly Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Harry ducked his head under the many wide-eyed looks he received.

“Immobulus, Mr. Harrigan?” McGonagall said, coming closer. “That is not a spell I would typically recommend in a situation like this.”

Harry winced. “It was the first thing that came to mind,” he admitted. “Probably petrificus totalus would have been better.”

Surprisingly, the Transfiguration professor shook her head. “If you had tried that, we would probably have you in intensive care at St Mungo’s for the foreseeable future. This level of power is impressive, but not, I hope, something you have much experience in using regularly. I’m rather surprised you are on your feet at all.”

Harry shrugged weakly. He wasn’t sure what the Professor wanted him to say—the last time they had spoken directly, it had been when she was trying to stop him from going to the Halloween meeting. If only she had succeeded!

“I think perhaps a Pepperup Potion is in order, at the least,” she went on speculatively. “Mr. Black, if you would make sure he reaches the Hospital Wing?”

Harry winced. He really didn’t want to be alone with Sirius, not when he was on the brink of toppling over again. “I… I’ll probably just head up to the dorm for an early night, Professor…”

“You haven’t had supper yet, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said, sounding strangely stern, probably to cover that he couldn’t care less about Harry’s well-being. “Which you will need, in order to recover properly. And you do have classes to attend tomorrow. But I can spare you the trip to the infirmary—I have spare Pepperup in my office.”

“Very well,” said McGonagall. She looked around, finding Professor Slughorn entering at the opposite end of the hall with James. “Mr. Lupin, I would like you to remain, but Mr. Black, Mr. Potter, you may return to the dormitory. Do keep an eye for anyone who the Headmaster may have released prematurely, though. We don’t need any more trouble.”

“If you don’t mind, I will leave the situation in your hands, Madam,” Quora said. “After all, I know no more than you do.”

“Of course. Do ensure Mr. Harrigan gets that potion, Tim.”

Quora gestured for Harry to follow him out of the hall. Harry glanced over to Pandora, but she was still busy with Dumbledore, so he had no choice but to follow the defense professor, alone.

He trudged silently down the halls. Quora seemed strangely tolerant of his weakness, as he slowed his pace significantly. Perhaps he just suspected Harry’s fanciful thoughts of trying to dart away before they reached the office, but Harry knew he wouldn’t get far, and wasn’t particularly interested in raising a scene.
“That was a rather… impressive display,” Quora remarked as they walked into his classroom. He didn’t sound particularly impressed. “I wouldn’t have thought you had it in you to perform that level of magic.”

“I think the issue is that I don’t, sir. Or I wouldn’t need the potion,” Harry said. He regarded the stairs skeptically, but Quora seemed inclined to wait for him to climb them first. At least if he fell, it would be onto the man. Maybe Quora would be knocked over, hit his head on the way down, and forget the last six months entirely? Or maybe Harry would?

There was no falling, and Quora’s door swung open as they approached. Harry could barely sense the wards on the room as he walked through, which, from his previous observations of them, was a good sign he really did need that potion.

It seemed he wasn’t going to get it, however. The moment the door clicked shut, a hand grabbed him by the neck of his robes and slammed him into the bookshelves by the door, each slate of wood pressing a sharp line into his back, the direct contact with the wards there and the books beyond darkening his vision with the intensity. For a moment, it was all Harry could do to think straight, but he could not ignore the suddenly violent man for long.

“What did you tell him?” Quora snarled, his face inches from Harry’s.

“What?” Harry asked, desperately trying to look anywhere but the man’s eyes. He craned back as far as he could. “Tell who? You’ve—”

“Dumbledore!” the reply came. “Taking tea with the headmaster, Harrigan? Tell me, how long did you talk before your mouth started forming its own words? A minute? Five?”

Harry blinked several times, slowly beginning to realize what the man meant. “You’re blowing this completely out of proportion,” he said shortly. “The meeting wasn’t about you, and even if it were, as you just pointed out you made sure personally that I wouldn’t be able to give you away.”

Quora’s eyes narrowed. “Not about…”

“Yes, imagine that. Two people who would rather have nothing to do with you, meeting up and somehow not talking about—”

“Crucio,” Quora snapped, and Harry really should have seen that coming. Fortunately, he was too busy writhing to berate himself. Unfortunately, he wasn’t thinking much of anything beyond the pain, the sense that he was burning—freezing—his skin an unlikely conduit for lighting—his body being torn apart—

At some later point, Harry found himself on the floor, still shaking, though the spell seemed to have ended. The stone around his face was glistening with a mix of sweat, spit, and tears, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to try and sit up just yet, wincing as a muscle in his back cramped. He was lucky he’s spit out the tea Dumbledore had offered, or there doubtless would be more bodily fluids for him to wallow in.

An unforgivable curse for not being able to hold his tongue… What would it be like when Harry did something really worth the man’s anger?

“What was the meeting about?” Quora demanded from above.

It took Harry a minute to remember anything beyond the hallway. “We were talking about the holidays, and considering my plans for this summer,” he said. “He’s been my unofficial benefactor since I came here. We talk sometimes. Not very often, but…”
More magic spun towards him, and Harry tried to flinch away from it, but it just pulled Harry’s body into the air. He hung there for a moment, thinking as quickly as he could manage, and saw Quora advancing, wand drawn. Perhaps it was not the wisest move in the face of a hostile dark wizard who had just proven himself to have no inhibitions with the magic he would use, but at the sight of him Harry squeezed his eyes shut. He did his best to call on his occlumency, but he was so tired…

“Open your eyes.”

And so Harry’s suspicions were confirmed. He shook his head. “I value my sanity,” he said.

“Inimperio.”

In the wake of the Cruciatius, the imperius was a much different beast from how Harry remembered it. They were a powerful combination. The Cruciatius made every inch of him burn and ache, like a thousand needles charged with electricity pressing into him, but the imperius took that all away. It was like falling into bed after a long day, responsibility and effort to stay awake taken out of his hands. Had Harry not been occluding, he might really have fallen asleep.

As it was, he was surprised to find he could feel the curse at work, and when the voice came with the command, it was easy to identify as coming from Quora, not himself—not that it made it sound any less enticing.

Open your eyes, it coaxed. Trust him. Let him in.

With great effort, Harry opened his mouth, not his eyes. “You said I could keep my secrets. I’m not letting you into my head.”

The curse grew more demanding. It began to push against his barriers and, finding no purchase there, pounded against them. Open your eyes, it repeated. You will do it, because you don’t want to suffer. Let him in.

Harry swallowed. There was the pain again, pushing against his head. If he had been in better condition, maybe that would have been effective. Now, it just helping him wake up. “I can tell you exactly what happened, if you really want details.”

OPEN YOUR EYES! the voice shrieked.

Gathering what little energy he could, Harry summoned his occlumency and imagined a great door slamming shut. “NO,” he snarled back, and he wrenched himself out of its hold. It must have pulled him out of the hold of whatever spell was holding him up, too, because he crashed back into the shelves, sliding down to the floor, his head colliding hard against the stone.

He was really going to need these robes washed. He could taste and feel blood dribbling out from his nose, mixing with the rest of the concoction on the floor. The essence of him, bodily fluids smeared on stone… he shuddered. As a potion in the making, it would have to be a dark one.

The room was silent for a few minutes, just the sound of Harry sniffling and trying to deal with a nosebleed without opening his eyes. Quora was standing over him, wand in hand, but he did not move or summon any magic. Harry kept his eyes shut. If it was to be a battle of wills… it would take more than a few unforgivables to break him.

“You came up in conversation exactly once,” he said, nose pinched and head tilted forward, hoping that Quora’s silence meant he would actually listen. “We were discussing an offer from the OMRL for me to return next summer, and the work I’ve been doing. I told him that I’m not sure where I’m going to find the time to continue it, now that I am your assistant. He said, and I quote, ‘I was rather
surprised to hear you had taken up Professor Quora’s offer.”

Another stretch of silence. Harry was almost tempted to open his eye just to figure out if the man was even listening. He wasn’t moving, talking, or using magic, so Harry wasn’t sure what was left that he could be doing. It was probably a trap. He kept his eyes shut.

Finally, Quora spoke. His voice was flat, betraying nothing. No anger, no high-handed, ‘you have played right into my cunning plan’, smirking contempt. Nothing. “And what did you tell him?”

“That Severus and Professor Slughorn talked me into it, and that I needed the money. Which is the truth as either of them would see it.”

After a moment, Quora called on his magic again. Harry didn’t even bother to try and protect himself. What was left of his strength was keeping his head from slumping down to his chest.

The spell, however, was not directed towards him. It stretched out towards one of the shelves on the opposite side of the room, passing through the ward beyond where Harry could follow it, and Harry heard the click of a door or lid opening. Then two objects—potions, Harry figured, though his senses were stretched so thin he couldn’t be certain—emerged, soaring through the air to land on the ground beside Harry’s unoccupied hand, no more than a soft chink of glass on the stone. Ahead of him, Quora’s robes rustled as he finally moved, climbing lightly up the wide stairs and settling in the chair behind his desk.

“You will want to drink both of those. Otherwise I really will have to refer you to Madam Pomfrey, and as she had a tendency to keep students overly long, I would rather not lose my assistant and student for tomorrow.”

Harry considered his situation, and wrapped all of his focus around Quora before slowly opening his eyes. Even as exhausted as he was, the man’s magic was still like a magnet to him, and closing his eyes again was something he could do pretty quickly. He would just have to trust that he could sense a change in magic quick enough to respond.

If that was a bad choice, he blamed it on the blood loss, magical exhaustion, and torture spell trifecta. It was probably also a bad idea to get the blood off his face with a tergeo, but he did that, too, and his vision went spotty for the effort.

The first of the potions was easily recognizable as pepperup. He had brewed it for the infirmary several times now, and between that and class Harry could easily identify the deep orangish-red, slippery liquid. He still wafted the scent towards himself before deciding it was safe to consume, but as the draught contained salamander blood, which reacted dramatically to any changes in the brewing, the color and consistency alone would have been clear signs of tampering.

It left a sour taste and oily feeling it left in his throat, but the potion worked quickly, seeking out what little magic he had left and reacting with it to create a false kick of energy. Technically, it worked by convincing his magic that every single bit of it was actually two bits, spreading it out, decreasing the density, if he could bring himself to imagine magic as physical particles. It was a painfully imperfect metaphor, because magic wasn’t particles, and didn’t behave in the way particles did, but among wizards—even medical magic researchers—the particulars of how a potion worked would always be less important than the results. And the pepperup did work, and it worked without any negative side effects unless someone severely overdosed on it, stretching the magic to a state of nothingness, or took it when they had too much magic to begin with.

Harry did not, and so the potion hit him like a fresh jolt of electricity through a dying battery. The worst side effects he would face would be shaking hands—no worse than a caffeine buzz—an
inability to fall asleep for the next hour or so (two side effects he would have from this encounter anyways) and steam, the byproduct of the expanding magic, being expelled from his ears at variable intervals.

The second potion Harry did not recognize. It was a sage green substance with a silvery film on the surface, and seemed to move like a semi-solid goop rather than a liquid, though it was not particularly thick. Harry frowned at it.

“A muscle relaxant, of a sort,” Quora explained. “It forces your muscles to remain loose, but within the limits of normal action. Your habit of flinching would be momentarily cured while under its influence, as would the spasms and cramping that you will otherwise find yourself plagued with for the next twelve to sixteen hours.”

There wasn’t much Harry could say to that. It struck him as odd, that Quora would so quickly go from holding him under the cruciatus to giving him the cure, but…

He wasn’t about to just take an unknown potion in front of the man who had been trying to break into his mind minutes before, in any case. He could tell it wasn’t veritaserum or any of the potions that had been described in his book on mind magic, but he wasn’t an expert. “I will take it with me for later, if it is all the same to you.”

“Very well. You should know that the gaes will keep you from consulting with Mr. Snape or one of your other friends regarding it.”

“So if you’re poisoning me, Madam Pomfrey will have to figure it out without me telling her anything. Great.”

Harry could feel the look he was getting for that comment. He didn’t even need to look up. At least it was only a look, this time.

“I’m not trying to poison you, Mr. Harrigan. And if I were, you wouldn’t be aware until it was too late for you to do anything about it. I do loathe the implication that I am so lacking in subtlety.”

“You just used two unforgivables. On a student. In Hogwarts. That’s not exactly subtle.”

There was a pause, but once again, no magic was forthcoming. Harry, realizing he had left his bag with Pandora, put the potion in the pocket of his robes. He would have Hani watch over him when he took it later, a bezoar—Severus’s favorite antidote—in hand.

“And you continue to astound me with your stupidity—excuse me, courage, boy. But I suppose you have no need for fear when you can just blunder your way through any situation by pure loggerheadedness.” His eyes narrowed, and Harry realized that he’d let his gaze drift to far up. He forced his eyes back to the stone slick with the sweaty mixture. “Tell me, Mr. Harrigan: have you been trained to resist the imperius, or do you blunder your way through it on stubbornness alone?”

Harry curled his hand into a fist, driving the nails into his palm, hoping that would stop it from shaking. “Occlumency isn’t that different,” he pointed out. “It’s all about controlling your own mind. Not letting anyone else take hold.”

Quora snorted. “And clearly you are the epitome of control.”

Harry swallowed. “May I go, sir?” he asked. “You said I needed supper.”

“So I did. Can you even stand?”
That was a question worth considering, but Harry wasn’t going to waste time and energy thinking about it. Instead, he peeled himself from the bookshelf he was leaning against and pulled himself shakily to his feet. His legs protested the weight, but he’d had worse—he couldn’t imagine what, exactly, would be worse than a mad man’s Cruciatus when he was at his lowest, but he knew he had. He swallowed, and channeled every ounce of what strength he’d found to throw off the imperius into the simple act of staying upright, keeping his eyes on the floor, as it seemed to be swaying under his feet. If Quora had any thoughts on the defiant motion, he did not voice them.

“Very well,” Quora repeated. He was still looking at Harry like he was some sort of deep sea fish living in a puddle on a street in London. “Do drink that potion, Mr. Harrigan. Remember that you are to report back here at one thirty tomorrow—and be sure to eat beforehand, as I expect the five hours you are being paid for to be filled entirely. I will have no pity for any residual nausea or shaking hands or lack of sleep, not when I have so graciously provided a solution.”

_A solution to a problem that your paranoia created_, Harry wanted to spit back. He managed not to. Mostly because it took everything he had to keep his knees from buckling under him, but not having enough energy to pick a fight was undeniably beneficial to his survival.

It didn’t completely curb his sarcasm, though. That would be impossible. “Of course, sir. Clearly, it will be the highlight of my week.”

Quora raised an eyebrow. “Get out before I curse you again, Harrigan. Find someplace to sit before you fall over. And for Merlin’s sake, don’t try any more magic tonight. Sleep. I will deal with you tomorrow.”
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late posting! This was the chapter that took me the longest to write, so, naturally, the longest to edit. Especially since a good 2/3rd of that editing was faster to do just by re-writing, just to catch the spots where only being able to write small bits of it at a time left things a bit jenky. Granted, since I re-wrote... 5000 words of it today, it might still be a bit jenky. Ah, well.

WARNINGS: so, yeah, uhm. Lots of warnings for this chapter, which basically bubble down to: Descriptions of torture. it's... fairly graphic, in both the physical and psychological violence going down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At 1:25 PM on Saturday, the 8th of January, 1977, Harry stood at the bottom of the staircase at the front of the defense classroom, hand shaking in the air over the railing, eyes trained on the door at the top of the steps without really seeing anything. His mind was preoccupied. Visual information unimportant, in the consideration of his destination.

The wards on Quora’s office were problematic.

Problematic— it was ridiculous to couch his situation in such terms. They were downright terrifying, not for their superior craft (Quora’s own work, no doubt; woven with such clear intention and power and precision that they were unsettlingly perfect) but for what lay behind them. Everything, or nothing. Both, in a way. In uncertainty, Harry’s mind leapt to the worst.

Harry had read and experimented enough with wards to know they usually had some sort of fault. Either they were too weak to stand against any great force, or written with compromises that could be exploited, or brittle and filled with cracks—tiny faults that cursebreakers were experts in finding and wedging open. The null ward had all three faults, and more, no doubt. Harry had intentionally written compromises to allow some magic to still pass through, and when it had broken, it had been because of the pressure of Quora’s magic, and because something had gone wrong that had left weak points where it had already been failing.

These wards had none of those weaknesses. None that Harry could find, at least, and he had an easier time of it than most. Especially now, when he devoted his full attention to them, not distracted by Quora’s magnetic presence or the chaos of his classmates, not driven to the edge of sanity by fear or under such magical strain he could barely stand on his own feet. And they were unlike anything he’d ever seen. They had an industrial sort of quality, Harry thought, where mostly the wizarding world ran on hand-crafted workmanship. They were too perfect for any normal wizard to have cast —

Yet when had Harry ever mistaken Quora for normal?

Still, it was not the craft that was troublesome, it was the function. They were wards: separating what was within from without, and privacy wards no less. Necessary for a man of Quora’s deceit, they shielded from any form of outside observation.
That included Harry’s magemetry. He had never felt so vulnerable, so dependent on the sense. But what was that vulnerability but another side to a curse he’d already been under?

No, it wasn’t just that. He supposed that even if there had been no wards, and that it had only been a thick stone wall and heavy wooden door between him and that room, that man, he would have still felt this overwhelming apprehension. Out here, he was safe. Separate—not really, of course, but it was the illusion that mattered. Once he opened that door and crossed the threshold, he would find—

What? What? Timothy Quora, the stern professor with too little time for foolishness? The Dark Lord, who cast Crucio without a second thought? Or Quora, the constant question, who jumped between good humor and cool anger with hardly a blink, who twisted Harry into believing he was the professor then plummeted suddenly into darkness as Harry had never known?

There was no way to say what awaited him, without going in. No way of reaching ahead to get some sense, no precognition of what fate had in store. And the fear was almost too much—Harry was so tired, despite a full night’s sound sleep, and if he moved to suddenly he ached in reminder of the day before, and yet there was was a current of energy in him, that urged him to turn and run, to let his feet carry him as far away from here as they could manage, to—

The bell tolled, cutting off his thoughts. And again. Too late, now. Harry slowly forced himself to lower his hand on the rail. To lift his right knee, and bring his foot forward, and rest it on the first step. Brace, and lift—

He had made up his mind, he reminded himself. He needed Hogwarts’ resources if he was to complete his task—his left foot found the second step—and if he fled Hogwarts he had no chance of true escape, back to the future, where—right foot, third step—he belonged. Quora did not care whether or not Harry was afraid. As long as he could keep the ‘Professor’ appeased, he would be fine—fourth step—and if not, he would be dead. Or under such powerful compulsions magic he would barely count as living. Which would be worse. If Quora managed that sort of control, Harry’s secrets would be entirely at his mercy. The future would be at his mercy.

He did not strike Harry as a particularly merciful man.

Yes, that was what he was up against. Harry mustered his courage, and forced his fear of the unknown into the depths of his mind, burying it in the labyrinthian protections he had built with his occlumency, steeled his nerves, straightened his back, and brought up his hand to knock.

At first touch, the door swung open.

For all the determination it took to get up the stairs, he might have faced a dragon and stood strong. Instead, he found Quora bent over his desk, quill in hand, writing without pause, not even glancing up as Harry came inside. Had it been anyone else, Harry might have wondered if his entrance had even been noticed. He cautiously came forward, stepping out of the doorway but not quite reaching the two broad steps that led up to Quora’s desk.

Behind him, magic flared, pulling the door shut again. The click of the latch seemed to echo off the high ceilings of the room, too loud.

“Sir?” Harry finally said. Quora didn’t look up, but waved his free hand almost carelessly, gesturing towards a wooden chair tucked away with a little side table in between two of the bookshelves. It hadn’t been there before. There were still traces from the wards on the shelf that had stood in the spot previously, remnants of runes broken recently enough that Harry could make out their shapes. And even had he not… he had been rather forcefully made familiar with the bookshelves the afternoon before, as Quora grabbed him and flung him into one, pressing him into the magic—
Not the one that was now missing, which made it easier for Harry to lower himself onto the front edge of the chair, sliding his bag slowly down to rest against his foot without letting go of the strap. He eyed the spot where he’d been writhing on the floor, and for a moment, could see it clearly, and distantly, as though it had been a movie he had watched a long time ago, something that had happened to someone else. But he flinched away, looking elsewhere. And if he wasn’t to look at floor or bookshelves, in this room, that left only Quora.

Quora, who seemed entirely absorbed in his work. Whatever it was, there was no use guessing, but Harry took the chance to study the man. He wore blue robes today, cassocks in one diamond-patterned fabric and a darker, sleeveless over-robe draped from his shoulders, embroidered, as most of the robes he wore were, with metallic thread; silver, today, in a delicate vine pattern, dense foliage at his shoulders spreading as it crawled down his chest. It wasn’t anything Harry would ever think a Dark Lord would wear, let alone one known for base violence, and it did not look much like what a professor would wear, either. Dumbledore was known to wear brightly colored robes, and they could be ornate, but every robe Harry had seen Quora in looked like it belonged at one of the Malfoy’s parties. And among the plain black work robes the students wore, made for durability and conformity, not extravagance, the effect was only worsened.

Quora cleared his throat, and Harry blinked, realizing he’d been staring without seeing again, and refocused his attention on Quora’s chin. Quora sat with the tip of his quill poised over a half-full vial of ink, the excess pooling and dripping back into the black well. But with his other hand, he sent a burst of magic Harry’s way, and Harry braced himself, horrified at how unexpectedly vulnerable he’d let himself become—

But the spell was not aimed towards him. Rather, it found the bookshelf on the other side of the table to his left, and pulled from behind the wards a black folio not unlike the one Quora carried to each of his classes.

“There are quills and ink for you to use in the drawer,” Quora said as Harry carefully took hold of the folio proffering itself from the air in front of him. “At the front is a grading key. Mark wrong answers with full points off, half-point deductions for spelling and, if you must, partial answers. No credit if it is illegible. Don’t bother with any commentary, and don’t spend more than three minutes per student—you have thirty-six first years to get through and twenty-seven second years after that. Understood?”

Harry nodded slowly, pressing his thumb against the silver clasp until the folio fell open, revealing the contents exactly as Quora had described. A metal clip held the stack of homework secure, and the back was hard enough to write on—like a clipboard, almost, except… classier, more professional. Or professorial—or pretentious. Harry twisted in his seat to open the drawer set into the tabletop, and found the several of the promised bottles of ink (red) and quills (grey). He withdrew one of each, listening as the scratching of Quora’s work resumed, and wondered which version of ‘Quora’ the metal nibs were a preference of.

The quill Harry had been sent had a metal nib, too.

Luckily, these were wide grey feathers, not striated ones; hippogriff down, not owl primaries. He shuddered involuntarily, wondering—no. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind, and un-stopped the ink.

Once Harry had settled enough to stop thinking up ways that a magically inane stack of first-year homework could be a trick or weapon being used against him, he found that the grading itself was… work. ‘Boring’ was an unexpected experience when sharing a room with a potentially homicidal dark wizard, but time passed uneventfully, and Harry’s strained attentions slowly converged on the
task at hand. They might really have been just a professor and assistant hard at work, were they any other pair.

To be fair, the work wasn’t even that boring, really; eleven-year-olds had a gift for writing down bizarre answers when they clearly didn’t know what the question was asking. Some of them were quite entertaining, others were just... completely unrelated to anything Harry could make sense of. He supposed he was sparing them Quora’s displeasure, which was some consolation for the twinge of guilt he felt every time he ticked a red mark. And though Quora had told him not to write comments, Harry made more than a few, writing in small letters, as though it would somehow negate the rebellion. NO, he wrote beside an explanation of vampires that seemed to have been based entirely off of a Dracula movie. Almost, he added when one student managed to get every spell one letter off from the proper spelling.

Try as he might, as Quora had predicted there were several pages that Harry simply could not decipher. It wasn’t even the usual trickery of making an ‘e’ look like an ‘i’ by putting a dot over it, so that they could argue either way (though a few did try that), it was print that shook so violently a cat might have been playing with the other end of the quill, and letters so thick with ink they became formless black blobs followed by the scratchiest of lines with dents in the page. He couldn’t bring himself to give zeroes, not when he could see that the students had tried, and unsure what to do with them, he shuffled them to the end of the pile. But when he finished grading the ones he could read, he had to deal with them somehow.

The next time Quora paused, stretching his arms out, Harry swallowed his nerves and asked.

“As I said: no credit. Are you done with those?”

“They’re eleven,” Harry protested. “If no one’s taught them to use a quill, it’s not their fault. No one taught me.”

“And yet, now you can.” Quora produced a cloth and a vial of clear fluid from his desk and set about cleaning the nib of his pen. “If they can’t be bothered to teach themselves, it is not my problem.”

Harry shook his head. “Then whose is it? It’s not their fault. If you don’t have parents who can teach you that sort of thing—muggles teach their kids to write using practical tools. It’s no their fault that wizards are stuck in... medieval times.”

Quora paused, looking up to study Harry with an unreadable expression. Harry quickly looked away, though there wasn’t so much as a ripple in the man’s magic as he considered Harry. Perhaps it wasn’t wise to tout muggle practices over wizarding ones, all things considered, but really...

“Regardless of their background, it is not my responsibility to deal with. It is the esteemed Headmaster who insists on bringing them in without trying to, ah, impose our culture on their delicate sensibilities.”

“If you’re going to mark them down for it—”

Harry stopped himself, this time, biting his lip and almost pushing his hand through his hair before he realized that would probably get red ink all over his face. His teenage skin was bad enough without bright red dots—freckles could only hide so much. ‘They need someone qualified to teach them. My writing is still terrible. I was never taught.’

“Your ‘Professor’ did not teach you?”

Harry paused, which was better, he supposed then giving himself away surprise or a flinch. His past
was… not a safe topic. More dangerous than arguing with the man over something petty like this, at least—but he tried to recall what he could.

He didn’t remember anyone ever teaching him, though if he thought hard enough about it he could picture his first frustrating attempts, and his fear that his aunt would discover the black splotches on the desk. That seemed irrelevant, and his later memories too vague to base a concrete lie off of. Well, if he was questioned further, he could blame the supposed gaes and choke on his words. For now…

“My education was more… practical,” he said haltingly. “We…” He trailed off, taking his time to choose his words. “There were… others, in the coven, who would give us written work, and they expected me to use a quill, but I was…” Not held to the same standard, he was going to finish, as he was muggle-raised, but he didn’t want to give that sort of detail. Quora would dig his claws into it. “…never shown, properly,” he said instead. “And I mostly used muggle things, when I had the choice. It was only when I came here that I had to use quills regularly.”

Quora seemed to contemplate this answer, but made no comment. Nothing to suggest he hadn’t believed Harry, but no sign that he had, either. The man set the quill he had cleaned aside, stoppered the ink and the cleaning fluid, and returned the two bottles to the drawer. In their place he produced another, this one containing red ink, like what Harry was using. For a minute, it seemed he wasn’t going to address Harry’s inquiry any further.

“You can give them a chance to rewrite this assignment neatly,” he said at last, as he brought up his hand to summon another of the black folios from the shelf. Harry was nearly hit in the face with it, surprise dulling his reflexes. “Marking the revisions, however, will be on your own time, outside of your paid hours. You’ve spent too long on the first years already.”

Harry accepted that and, shuffling the second folio under the first, made notes on the appropriate pages, blowing the ink to speed the drying along. Had he actually… That was a concession, wasn’t it? Quora had commanded one thing, Harry had argued another, and he had… won.

What?

He looked up again, wondering what to do with the completed stack, but the man was at work again, and Harry—he had already tempted fate enough for one day. He reshuffled the folios in his lap, and turned to his next stack of work.

And then they returned to working in silence. The second years’ homework was more involved, all the sort of questions where Quora’s key provided a list of key terms and concepts for them to have covered. Some of the students—no doubt itching to make a good impression on their new professor—had written twice as much as was strictly necessary, which meant Harry was stuck reading twice as much work. At least in this set there was only one illegible assignment.

At one point, Quora stood from his desk, and Harry nearly fell out of his seat. He quickly stilled himself, hoping his surprise hadn’t been noticed, watching as Quora’s feet crossed to one of the shelves on the other side of the room, and as he pulled down a book and opened it where he stood. It wasn’t that he’d forgotten Quora was there, surely, he had just been… overly focused. Harry licked his lips and stared, swallowing his horror, but—

Quora wasn’t doing anything, he reasoned. If the red ink was enough to go by, he was as focused on grading as Harry was. Of course Harry shouldn’t completely let his guard down, but… he couldn’t spend the whole day worrying about someone who wasn’t even paying attention to him, could he?

Quora turned around again, and Harry hastily returned to reading. There wasn’t even a flicker in Quora’s magic as he returned to his seat and took up the quill again, but even that was… unsettling.
Whatever he was doing to his magic to keep it contained like that, it wasn’t natural. Even Severus, the most contained person Harry had ever seen, had regular movement…

Shifting in his seat, Harry started the sentence over again, determined to focus on his work. Quora wanted to pretend they were just teacher and assistant? Harry could do that. He could play the part. And at least he knew he could focus now. He could remember his first attempts at research, alone in the library, when sitting for hours made him angry. Restless. Now… he clenched his jaw, and read the sentence again. And the next, and the next, and tried to put his unease to the back of his mind.

So it went on. Harry lost track of how long they had been sitting in silence, and barely noticed when the bells rang to mark the hours, and the next time Quora stirred, clearing his throat, Harry only glanced halfway up at him, finishing the note he was leaving.

When he finished, he flushed, looking up. Quora was watching him pensively, hands folded on the desk before him—the empty desk.

“It’s a quarter to seven.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He’d only been scheduled until six thirty. Dinner would be on downstairs. He looked down at the half-marked paper. “Should I finish?”

“How many do you have left?”

“Um… four, after this.”

Quora shook his head. “I will need to examine a sample; those should do. Bring them here, please.”

Harry nodded and twisted in his seat to pull out his wand and spell the tip of the quill clean before he set it aside and stoppered the ink, returning the tools to the drawer, which gave the page he had been writing on enough time to dry. Harry stood slowly, rolling his shoulders as he carried the two folios to Quora’s desk, trying not to jump when Quora drew out his wand and conjured another wooden chair, motioning for Harry to sit. He did so, expecting the man to open the folios and look over his work, but instead Quora just glanced at where Harry had set them, reached out a hand to align the edges, and returned to his pensive position.

“You are a surprisingly tolerable worker, Mr. Harrigan,” he finally said.

Surprisingly tolerable? No wonder Severus liked the bastard—they spoke the same language, sauntering along a tightrope between compliment and insult without indication of which they were aiming for.

“Glad to be of service,” Harry tried to say dryly. It came out sounding like a question.

“Of course, your experience with the OMRL would suggest you are not entirely unaccustomed to work.”

Harry did not know what to say to that. But Quora seemed to be waiting for something, and Harry had never been good with outlasting awkward silences. “I’m of age, and without guardians,” he offered. “If I couldn’t work, I’d be spending the summer on the streets, and that’s not…”

He trailed away, unsure if he was helping or hurting himself, unsure of what Quora wanted. Better to say less. Quora, in any case, remained impassive, his response a single word: “Indeed.”

The man shifted, leaning forward in his seat to rest his elbows on the desk, folding his fingers together, his wand resting on his thumbs, parallel to the desk. His expression remained neutral, his
Unnatural, Harry thought, and then pushed it and his re-emerging nerves away, under a wall of occlumency, turning his thoughts to nothing in particular. He ran his thumbs along the edges of the spirals engraved at the ends of the armrests of his chair, pushing into them until the pressure against the wood almost hurt. There’d been a tremor in his hands all morning, even with both the potions he’d been given, but he didn’t want to think about that, either. Thinking seemed like tempting fate, at this point. Quora was staring at him unblinkingly from across the desk, and he clearly had an agenda, but whether it was an agenda from the facade or the truth of the situation, from the teacher or the Dark wizard, there was no way of knowing.

The silence stretched on, until Quora finally said: “And you are obviously a fairly intelligent young man.”

This was even more confusing than ‘surprisingly tolerable’. Harry was certain that Quora couldn’t possibly believe what he had just said, because… because… he just couldn’t. But he had delivered it in that same controlled tone…

Was it a good thing or a bad thing, to be—dare he say—complemented?

“I’ll take your word for it,” Harry said slowly.

“You have demonstrated that you can think things through, and provide unique insights. And these skills are not even solely dependent on your, ah, gift.”

“…my what?”

“Magemetry.”

 Definitely not a gift, that, but Harry was at least intelligent enough to keep his mouth shut. This time. If it had come from anyone else, he might have been embarrassed. With Quora—Harry felt rather like a wand twirled in someone’s hand, a card toyed with as the man prepared his next move for a game Harry couldn’t see.

“And you have an interest in Defense, specifically,” Quora went on. “Clearly, or you would not have received top marks, considering your overall performance as an average student. Upper average, at best.”

How could someone be ‘upper average’? “I guess,” Harry agreed, focusing on the part of the comment he could make sense of. From the smile ghosting the corners of Quora’s mouth, his confusion was recognized.

“I will have to test you at some point. A proper assessment of your abilities. You can think, but…” The hint of a smile widened to a proper smirk. “Relying on running away and hiding won’t get you far in life.”

Harry stiffened, because there was no way he could mirror Quora’s calm, not while staring at the back of his hand barely containing his bubbling panic. He had only provided those answers in class because no one else had, and Quora knew that. He just brought it up to, what, tease Harry? Was teasing a safe realm to be in? He wouldn’t turn from teasing to cruciating, would he?

“And the Dark Arts?” Quora asked suddenly.

“…what about them?”
“You must have dabbled. Opinions?”

Harry glanced warily up again, eyes landing back on Quora’s wand. “I don’t care for them.”

“Do explain.”

In most situations, Harry thought, you wouldn’t need to explain distaste for the Dark Arts, yet here he was, chewing on his cheek, trying to find an acceptable non-answer. This was, after all, a Dark Lord he was talking to. Harry wasn’t going to disguise his opinions—Quora knew already that they did not agree on most things—and he didn’t want Quora getting the notion that Harry was like Severus with his obvious fascination, but he also didn’t fancy presenting himself as completely oblivious…

“They make me sick,” he finally declared.

For a moment, he feared he’d made the wrong choice, but then Quora laughed. Harry blinked, eying Quora’s feral grin. Had he played his hand well? Quora was laughing—but Harry didn’t feel any particular triumph. Amusement was unlikely to change any of Quora’s plans. Not that Harry had been trying, but…

“So you have dabbled,” Quora said. “I’d wondered.”

Why did the man look so damn pleased? Harry had essentially just called himself as green as grass in spring, if Severus’s explanation on his nasty reaction to legilimency was anything to go by.

But then Quora’s eyes flicked up to Harry’s forehead. “Of course, you’ve been around the Dark your entire life, it seems. Not surprising you would dabble, when it’s written on your face.”

Warning bells were going off in Harry’s mind, loud and clear, enough to send a spike of a headache like a lightning bolt through his mind. Change the subject, he thought desperately, but how? Quora wouldn’t be fooled.

“No one else but you pays any attention to it. I’d rather forget that it’s there.”

Quora gave another little chuckle. “Noticing such things is, ah, in the job description. But you must have noticed, it being on your face. You at least cared enough to have it bound in a disguise. That is powerful magic, to bind a remarkable curse scar.”

They were getting into deeper, darker waters. Of course Quora would have noticed Dumbledore’s spell work, too. “The only thing remarkable about it is that it’s on my face. I’d rather not have something like that to give people reason to stare.”

“No, you’re much more useful unremarkable,” Quora agreed. (Harry scowled—’upper average’ or not, he wasn’t completely unremarkable!) “Your relatives said it was from a car crash.”

“Yes.”

“What were they like?”

“…car crashes? I don’t actually know.”

Quora’s good humor finally seemed to slip again. He didn’t like to repeat himself, then. That could be useful to know.

“Your relatives. They were muggles, yes? And they kept you from Hogwarts as long as you were
under their control. What were they like?”

Harry frowned, thrown by the boomeranging conversation. And even if it weren’t Quora, he didn’t have much specific to say, only vague notions of an unfortunate childhood. His specific memories reduced to concepts like ‘I was shoved in the cupboard as a punishment for breathing’, which felt foreign and removed, like somewhere in his past he’d begun a game of telephone and now couldn’t tell what the words really meant. That was probably for the best, too.

“Unremarkable,” he answered.

Quora raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

Toying again with the detailing on the wood, Harry gave a half shrug. “We weren’t close. There’s not much to say.”

“And yet they tried to keep you from Hogwarts.”

Harry frowned. “They didn’t like me, and they didn’t like magic,” he said. “But I had a roof over my head and food in my belly.” Or a staircase over his head and scraps when he got them, but that was beside the point. “They were what they were, and I don’t have to deal with them anymore.”

Quora seemed to accept that, or at least decided not to push the issue any further. “That scar did not come from a car crash.”

It felt like Quora’s gaze was boring a hole in Harry’s skull. Or maybe that was from getting too close to the obfuscus with memories of his relatives…

“Me and Severus looked at it with all the spells in that book you recommended,” he pointed out. “And they said there’s nothing special about it. It’s not worth worrying about—”

He cut off as Quora stood up, drawing back his sleeves, wand reconnecting with his palm as he came around the desk. Harry eyed it warily, not daring to look up even when Quora halted in front of him and, without the slightest hesitation or warning, reached up and pushed Harry’s head firmly back.

Harry’s stomach flipped—Quora’s control of his overwhelming magic was not unlike a null ward, a barrier keeping everything contained, and the points of contact felt like tiny conduits to all that power, high-pressure jets blasting it into his skin. It was almost bearable, contained like this; his head was spinning, but Harry could still think, and when Quora spoke the words made some sort of sense…

“Forgive me if I do not put my faith entirely in the hands of two teenagers when my own intuition speaks otherwise.”

Harry’s eyes wide, forgetting even to struggle as Quora brought his wand up, holding Harry’s head firmly in place with the other hand. Whatever protests he might have had didn’t reach his lips before Quora cast.

Quora’s magic, when it wasn’t trying to tear him apart, was… smooth. Biding its time, waiting for the perfect moment to burst free from its cage. It was the gentle touch of a silk noose, the slippery scale of a constrictor shifting and rippling to its violent end. Harry’s mind flashed back to the reptile room in a zoo he had once visited—it was like that. Humid, warm shadows, accented with quiet rustling, quietly downplaying the danger hidden within. And it curled around Harry’s scar, pressing into it, and even if it had not Harry would have been drawn to it, and even knowing the danger he could not resist its siren’s call, and soon he was a stone sinking into the depths of a fathomless pool
—drowning, and yet: it was right.

The spells cut off, but Quora didn’t immediately move. Harry emerged from his trace with a whimper at the dissonance as from behind his lethargy his mind broke into a panic, echoes of that voice in the back of his head screaming at him to occlude, to run. He couldn’t stop his shudder as Quora finally released him, and glanced up, finding that placid face slanted into the slightest frown. Disappointment, but… not, Harry thought with relief, disappointment in him.

“Perhaps I underestimated your capacity,” Quora said after a moment, voice too soft to betray any thoughts. “Or, rather, Mr. Snape’s, I imagine.”

Harry blinked. “Huh?”

Quora sighed and turned away, reaching out to straighten the folios on the desk again, though they hadn’t moved. “Even I am missing them. By all accounts, that scar is a husk. Something belongs bound to it—and yet I cannot discern what.”

What was there to say to that? Now Quora had confirmed the vast unimportance of the scar, would silence be enough to drop the matter? No, Harry wouldn’t hope. Whatever the root of his obsession was, it was just that: an obsession. And it was obvious that no words from Harry would cure the man of it.

“If I had all the time in the world I might put more research to solving this puzzle. How irritating that there are limits.” Quora seemed to barely notice he was speaking his thoughts aloud, and there was a brief pause before he turned back around again, leaning against the front of his desk, folding his arms across his chest, drumming the fingers of his right hand along the bicep of his left arm. He looked down at Harry again, smiling without amusement, still speaking in little more than a murmur. “I confess, it is supremely dissatisfying not to resolve my curiosity.”

“...sorry?”

“You vex me, Mr. Harrigan.”

Harry shifted, moving enough that his legs began to prickle, waking from a sleep Harry hadn’t noticed. How long had he spent entranced by Quora’s magic? It was surely seven by now, and he hadn’t heard the bell…

“Can I go, then?”

Quora raised his wand again, and Harry gripped his seat tighter, cursing his tongue, pulling out all stops to reinforce his occlumency, thinking of nothing but labyrinths and static television screens, trying not to let his irrepressible panic show as Quora’s magic rippled and coalesced into a spell, funnelling through his wand in a precise burst.

It passed over Harry’s shoulder and struck the door.

As the lock clicked, for a moment the whole perimeter of the room was alight with magic, a circuit completed and new ward settling in place, flipping the others like window shades twisted from down to up, and Harry did not feel his breath catch in his throat as his mind struggled to keep up with the magic. Dark spots loomed at the edges of his vision—and then the ward sank back into the stone, into the other layers, and Harry was returned to himself, with only Quora, contained once more, to direct his sense at, and Harry remembered to breathe, then, and did his best not to shudder at the effort.

“You could just say no,” he said.
“Off the clock, and—ah, ‘off the radar’.”

It wasn’t the first time Quora had used a distinctly muggle phrase, but it caught Harry off guard. He watched Quora’s wand, twisting about in his hands again, an oddly visible habit for a man of his position and… whatever his age was. He didn’t dare look higher.

“Of course,” Quora went on, “now that we are off Hogwarts’ payroll, we can have a proper conversation.”

“We are still on Hogwarts grounds,” Harry pointed out. “And you’re still a professor.

“Would you prefer we relocated?”

Harry hastily shook his head, amending the direction of his protest. “I’m just… it’s my free time, as a student, it being the weekend, and all, and since I’m off the clock I’m not, uh, obligated to be here.”

“Oh, but you are.”

Harry caught his retort by the tail and flung it back behind a few more walls of occlumency, fighting to keep his voice level. To not let himself be goaded by this man. “Am I getting paid for this?” he asked, the first non-insulting, pseudo-pertinent question that came to mind.

To his surprise, Quora actually considered it. “Perhaps once you have been trained enough to be truly useful, we could work something out. Every arrangement of services rendered is different, after all. But time is money, Mr. Harrigan, and I suspect you will take more of my time than you rightly deserve, at this point. And my time is infinitely more valuable than yours.”

“I’m sure you have better things to do with it, too. So you could spare us both the waste…”

“I could. But I have deemed you a worthwhile investment, and I don’t particularly care whether or not you want to be here. Although, it is a blemish on my view of you. And I would be doing my utmost to exceed my expectations, if I were you.” He tilted his head slowly to one side, and after a moment’s deliberation raised his wand again. “Although, if you would like to leave,” he went on, voice dropping another notch, “it would be best for you to try now, if only to rid yourself of the notion that you can do so before I will it.”

Harry flinched, but he couldn’t help but be intrigued by the intricacy of the charm Quora released towards him—intrigued, that was, until at the end of Quora’s speech the magic leapt from the wand, split into two, and connected with the arms of the chair he was gripping so tightly, and the spiralled knobs at the ends unwound, giving the wood enough length to twist and wrap around Harry’s forearms, binding them to the rest of the chair—and it all happened in less than a second, leaving Harry to belatedly tug his arms in resistance.

He breathed as deeply as he could, when he regained control over his impulses. There was some part of him, half-lost in black-hole memories, which was beyond terror at having his movement so restricted—but Harry found control. He kept his eyes open, leveled his breathing, and counted to ten, and sought to channel Regulus, who wore the best mild-mannered mask of anyone he knew, when he looked up towards Quora’s neck and asked, “Was that really necessary?”

“You tell me,” Quora said. “You have given every indication that you do not wish to cooperate.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Harry replied. “Doing this… T.A, thing.”

“That is merely a convenient side benefit. There are more important things than grading papers.” He paused, still unmoving, and way too close for comfort. “Things such as Hector Smithe.”
Harry tried not to move, knowing that Quora would feel it by the grip on his wrists, but his stomach was doing somersaults. “Hector?” he echoed. “That wasn’t part of the—”

“To start with. Tell me about him.”

He was fairly certain Quora could feel his pulse, with the grip he had on him, because his heart was suddenly pounding. Hector? Harry wouldn’t—he couldn’t—why would Quora be interested in Hector, anyways? Let alone Harry’s, what, opinions? Gossip? But he couldn’t just say no, not when he was stuck like this. “What am I supposed to say? You never—”

“Introduce me as though tomorrow I would be taking your place and spending the day with him, and that it would be vital that every detail you know I could draw on, that Mr. Smithe would have no reason to suspect me. Begin with the basic facts, if you will.”

“You aren’t—”

Oh, God, was Quora planning to—that would be—

“It is a hypothetical situation, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said, in a voice that was probably supposed to be soothing.

(It was not, but then, there wasn’t a word that could come from Quora’s lips that would make Harry feel anything less than panic. Least of all now.)

It was a ridiculous order, anyways. “What’s the point in telling you something you already—”

Quora’s hand—the left one, without the wand between it and Harry’s skin—flared with magic, and while Harry dimly registered that it was hot against his skin, it was more the direct contact with the magic, wielded with the intent to hurt, that made him squirm, reflexively yanking his arm back with no success. It was only a brief flare-up, but it got the point across. Painfully clear.

“The point is that I told you to, Mr. Harrigan. So do start talking. Bore me with the details.”

Harry shuddered. “But you know everything already,” he repeated, because magic hands or no, he wasn’t going to give Quora anything. “And things like—like—like basic facts wouldn’t come up in conversation. And I never—”

“Shall I guide you? Like a first year?”

Quora sneered, leaning a bit closer. Harry couldn’t actually pull himself any further back in his seat, but that did not stop him from trying.

“I suppose that is what you are, in this matter. Question and answer? Very well, Mr. Harrigan. What is his name?”

Harry almost protested, out of momentum, but he stopped himself before he could. Give him this, he thought. It would make him look like he was complying, so when he later said his ‘I don’t know’s, it wouldn’t be so obvious. “Hector Smithe.”

“Middle name?”

Harry blinked. When would that ever have come up? Did Hector even— “I don’t think he has one.”

The man nodded, chin bobbing in the upper edge of Harry’s downcast vision. “Age and birthday?”

“He was… seventeen over the summer, I think.”
“You don’t know?”

Harry shrugged—or tried to, anyways, which only reminded him of his plight. “I’ve only known him a year,” he said.

“And yet he is your closest friend,” Quora said. Harry shrugged again. The motion pulled his arms uncomfortably against the wood—and Quora’s hands, reminding him they were there. Why were they still—”Very well. And his house?”

“...Ravenclaw,” he said slowly, trying and failing to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. Damn. He needed to—”

“And he dorms with?”

“Me,” Harry muttered.

A moment later his wrist was burning again, and this time it did not stop. “Do speak up, Mr. Harrigan. I despise mumbling.”

“Me,” Harry gasped out, somewhat louder. The magic faded.

“And at home, he lives with…”

“His parents,” Harry answered, frantically searching for their names as the magic threatened again. He was drawing up a blank. “His dad’s a pureblood—I think? He’s got a family seat... His mum’s a muggle.”

“And their names?”

Harry swallowed. “Mr. and Dr. Smith?”

“You don’t know?”

“He doesn’t talk about them much.”

Except when making sudden confessions about lasting trauma because Harry had been careless in choosing his shirt, but Quora did not need to know that.

“Anyone else?”

Harry shook his head. There wasn’t—now, at least.

“And his friends?”

Harry thought about that. “There’s a lot,” he said slowly. And Quora would sure have seen most of them, in the Great Hall if not in class.

“Then you had better start.”

Biting his lip, he sent a silent apology to Hector. This felt... slimy, the way gossip felt slimy. Even if Quora already know, a real friend wouldn’t be sitting here discussing him at all. “Pandora, I guess, would be the closest. Pandora Moone.” He wasn’t sure how much detail Quora wanted, so he trailed off, glancing towards Quora’s face before catching himself and looking away.

“We will discuss Ms. Moone another time. Who else?”
Harry had to think about it. Hector was pretty much always with Pandora, unless she was filling in on the Quidditch team or he was in a class she didn’t have, and comparatively, everyone else...

“Well, there’s Sanchez, I guess. Cat. I don’t know if you’d call them, um, friends, really, but…”

“My apologies. I should have asked for his close acquaintances,” Quora amended. “Their relationship?”

“They’re both doing nine NEWTs?” Harry didn’t know what else to say. That was the basis of everything between them, as far as Harry could tell—the bickering, the revision group.

“Who else?”

“Whoever’s in the Gobstone club, I guess,” Harry figured. “And the revision group.”

He regretted mentioning it a moment later, when Quora hummed. “Ah. Yes, the revision group. And that includes?”

Harry swallowed, but that was more due to the continued proximity than anything else—damn it, why wouldn’t Quora move? “Everyone from my year in Ravenclaw. Talkalot and Greengrass from Slytherin—er, Michael Greengrass, not his sister. And Kirke and Floyd from Hufflepuff, and Lily… Evans, Macdonald, and Alexi from Gryffindor.”

“And are any of those particularly close to Mr. Smith?”

“Kirke and Floyd? They’re close to everyone… Cat invited the Slytherins, and Lily got the Gryffindors.”

“And beyond that group?”

Harry glanced up, uncertain of what the question meant, only to look away again quickly. Beyond that group… oh, Hector. “He’s friendly with basically everyone in Ravenclaw,” Harry said. “He tutors some of the fifth years. Um… Crouch, Preston, Wesley, and Stratton, and the other boy—Quin or Quill or something? And Janice Cohen, I think. And Jackie’s little sister, but I think she’s younger. And the seventh years like him well enough.”

“I see. And?”

“And… he’s got friends in Hufflepuff—they’re friendly with everyone.”

“And you?”

Harry paused. “I suppose.”

“You suppose? One would think you would know something like that.”

They were friends, yes, but Hector was certainly a better friend than Harry was, and Harry had never deserved it. Least of all now. “Hector could make friends with a flobberworm, if he wanted. Assuming the flobberworm wasn’t prejudiced.”

“Indeed,” Quora drawled. “And what does Mr. Smithe think about political matters? What prejudices offend him?”

“…by that you mean Hector, right?” Harry asked, stalling for time. “Not his dad? Because—”

“Correct.”
What could he say, knowing that giving information could put Hector in danger for… But Hector was known for being outspoken about his beliefs, so it wasn’t as though Harry was being asked to divulge some great secret. Quora would find out soon enough, if he didn’t know already. And… Harry couldn’t be certain, but… Maybe making it clear Hector was entirely opposed to what the Dark Lord stood for would be a good thing. If Quora was here to recruit students, then…

“I mean, he and Pandora are pretty outspoken,” he began slowly. “They both believe in equal rights for all, regardless of blood status or anything like that. Pandora’s more interested in creature rights, I think, but Hector, um… His dad has a seat in the Wizengamot, but I think he’s been abstaining—but Pandora’s family, they’re pretty involved. Her dad sits four the Moones and her mom’s side is the Fawleys… so I mean, they’ve talked about some legislation and… stuff. Everyone says they’re beyond Liberal—”

“What sort of legislation?” Quora pressed. “Be specific. What have you heard them discuss?”

It was hard to think, with Quora leaning over him like this, so close that when he spoke Harry felt the air move. Hard to balance what he knew with what was safe to give—that was probably why Quora was doing it. To distract him… to intimidate him into making a mistake. Hesitantly, he went for the answer that Quora had to know about, all things considered…

“There was… the bill that Pandora’s cousin was involved with. When he was killed… Hector was angry that the bill was going to be delayed again, said his mother would be too.”

“The Hospital Visitation Reformation Action?” Quora said. “That’s a nearly unknown bill. His mother cared about that? How did she even hear about it?”

Harry tried to shrug again, but caught himself. There were going to be bruises on his arms if he didn’t hold himself still. “From Hector, I guess. It’s just one example of discrimination against mixed families. Which they have.”

“But surely, there must have been a reason you thought of that one first.”

“Maybe because Pandora’s cousin died over it?” Harry bit down on his tongue, and shifted again, though he couldn’t move far, between the wood and Quora’s grip. Why was Quora pressing this? “I don’t know. It was the first time I paid attention to politics, since Pandora was involved—”

“You barely mentioned Mr Fawley. You said Mr. Smithe was angry, because the bill would be delayed, not because of his death.”

“He was angry about that too—”

“But not so much. Why did he take it personally? Why would his mother?”

Harry could see where this was going, but how Quora had picked up so quickly that Harry was avoiding something—

A chill went down Harry’s spine. What if he already knew? He had said that Hector and Pandora were being investigated by others in the school… Harry had only Hector as truly close to Pandora, but maybe he’d had more friends closer to him before what happened. Maybe it was common knowledge, one of those bits of gossip that made its rounds through the entire school until it was covered by the next scandal… Maybe Harry was just digging himself into a dangerous hole for nothing, and it wasn’t worth trying to stand against Quora… He could just—

No. No! That was out of the question. Hector had told him about Raj in confidence—it had barely been a week since then. Harry wouldn’t just give that up so easily.
He shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe because his dad does medical research—he might have had feelings about it,” he offered. “Or maybe because Pan had told Hector about it, and he mentioned it to his mother. I don’t know. I don’t know them that well.”

For a moment, it seemed like the lie was going to pass. Then the perfect shell of Quora’s magic cracked, and it rushed out to strangle him, smother him, wrap around his body like barbed wire coiling around his skin—though nowhere was it more direct than his wrists, which Quora was squeezing so tightly Harry thought they might break, the heat spreading up from his grip like magma in Harry’s veins—

“You’re lying to me, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said, low and cold. He released one of Harry’s wrists, but his magic was left in full force, and Harry knew he was struggling against his seat, even though there was no point, that he would not escape it, releasing pathetic whimpering sounds— “Don’t you know it is dangerous to lie to a legilimens? Have you given into the temptation to try it for yourself, as you have studied occlumency?”

Harry was gasping for air, now, breath wheezing through his chest like the pressure was physical, like it was crushing his sternum into his windpipe, but he tried to check his occlumency. As far as he could tell, it was as stable as ever, maybe even stronger than usual, with how completely he was mustering his willpower to holding himself together.

“I think you have,” Quora went on. The hand he’d removed from Harry’s wrist was the one with his wand, Harry saw now, just in time for the tip to disappear from his vision, pressing against the side of his neck and trailing up. “What was it you said? ‘They make me sick.’ Was it your ‘Professor’ you tried it against? Or did your curiosity push you to delve on your own, against some unsuspecting classmate? Your roommate, perhaps?”

Harry balked. “I’d never do that one of my friends!” he said hotly.

“Oh, so you’re counting Mr. Smithe among your friends now,” Quora drawled. “I am glad you have put yourself on par with the flobberworms. Of course, a friend would pay attention well enough not to need legilimency to know things, wouldn’t they? So do tell, Mr. Harrigan.”

“I told you what I know!”

Quora smiled again, his left hand tightening on Harry’s wrist as he dug the wand into the soft skin under Harry’s chin, tilting it up. “You know what, Mr. Harrigan? I’m feeling generous. I will make it easy for you—no, don’t thank me. I don’t think you will like it much. Or maybe you will. Who am I to judge? Only time will tell… imperio!”

Harry gasped, trying to jerk away as the spell bubbled up, but it was too late and he had nowhere to go. It pushed into his mind, and Harry felt himself drawn into his thoughts, mind retreating from the physical world, while the spell curled itself around him, the constrictor settling around its prey—not enough to tether him, however, as he began to drift. He didn’t think it has been like this before. Friday, Quora had been more frantic, and it had more felt like something was digging its claws into him. But now...

When Quora spoke, it was like he was across the room, not inches from his face, no matter what Harry’s senses told him. “So, Mr. Harrigan? Why don’t you tell me about Mr. Smithe, hm?”

A spider in the dark was building a web of puppet strings, weaving them alongside his nerves, sending new impulses. But Harry could recognize the different. It had a voice, and it was in his head, but it wasn’t Harry.
Speak, it told him.

I don’t want to, he remembered.

Yes, you do, the voice replied. You want to tell him everything. You want to make all this tension fade away. You want a state of certainty. You want him to know what you know, and all it takes is for you to speak.

It was pulling at him, and Harry could feel a tensing in his throat, like it was preparing to speak, even as he kept his mouth closed.

You know he will just keep hurting you, the voice went on. You know he will find out anyways. Give him what he wants, and it will be so much easier, so worth it...

His lips curled open. That was fine—it could do what it wanted to his body, but it couldn’t access his thoughts. It could make him speak, physically, but it couldn’t choose what he said. “I’ve answered your questions,” he ground out, his voice echoing like it was someone else speaking. “I don’t know what you want me to—”

You know what he wants, the voice coaxed as Harry choked. He will reward you handsomely, and it will be so easy... he is more powerful than you can imagine, his reach extends so far... but if you fail, he will crush you... so do it...

No, he argued back.

His wrists were burning again.

Speak! Tell him—

“NO!”

Harry’s voice was lost under a clap like thunder as Quora’s spell broke, and Harry’s body jolted back, and this time the force of his movement was enough to topple the chair, sending him flying down the stairs, and it was only the twist of the chair and the arm colliding first that had the following crack be the wood wrapped around his left wrist shattering rather than his skull, but that hit the stone a moment later, and for a moment all Harry could see were dark sparks clouding his vision, and all he could hear was the ringing in his ears.

Would that it had remained that way. The ringing was broken by Quora’s boots on the short staircase, and he blinked to find one startlingly close to his face. He attempted to jerk away, again, but the world was spinning and blooming with vertigo and pain and splinters of wood digging into one arm and the unbroken grip tight around the other, and he was unsure whether he had actually moved at all.

“I do admire your strong will.” Harry tried to look up, to find the source of Quora’s voice, somewhere above him, but even moving his eyes hurt. “I don’t wish to break that. Mind you, it would be simple, to delve into your mind and force free what I want, but with your occlumency still in the early stages, it would do more damage than good. I prefer you whole, Mr. Harrigan. In the mental sense, at least. In the physical...”

Harry braced himself for more pain as Quora’s magic welled again, but it didn’t come. The spell connected with the wood and filled it and folded in on itself again and again until the chair had become nothingness, and Harry jerked his hands to his chest. It was like taking a deep breath after nearly drowning: he still hurt, and he wasn’t safe yet, but the combined release from the chair and the Imperius sent a burst of giddiness through him.
It didn’t last.

Quora’s next spell was sharper. Slower, too, more powerful, magic that coiled itself around Quora’s arm like a snake before it lurched towards Harry. Free of the chair, he managed to scramble backwards, but he wasn’t fast enough, and then it was pushing down on him, crawling up his spine and sliding between the joints, and he felt as though there was something actually there, a great boulder crushing him into the floor, making it hard to breath—and it sunk into his arms, too, and pulled until one had forced its way out from under his chest. This wasn’t the Imperius; he fought, but it wasn’t that his mind was being controlled. It was just his arm, and the movement was alien and terrifying. Harry could only watch as his right hand uncurled itself, fingers spreading out along the floor. And he could practically see Quora’s magic wrapping around it, like it was wrapped around the man’s own arms, and for a moment he thought there really were snakes—but he blinked and they were gone, just magic, invisible and queerly tangible as ever, pressing into his arm and through his robe with a smouldering burn…

“Shall we try again?” Quora said, voice mild, as though he were inquiring about the weather. “Have I sufficiently re-aligned your judgement?”

Try again? What were they— Hector. Raj. Oh, God; Harry couldn’t. If he—Quora would find a way to use it against Hector. Hector would—not this. Hector didn’t deserve anything like this. Quora wouldn’t—he would—

“His mother is a muggle and a doctor,” Harry ground out. Speaking was like vomiting gravel, the way it ached in his throat. And Quora’s magic was settling in his hand, now, curling around his fingers, and he—he just had to talk—“Doesn’t it make sense she would care about a bill around muggles and health care? I don’t know what connections you want me to make—”

He cut off with a wide-eyed hiss of horror—Pain, pain as the magic around his ring finger pulled until it snapped backwards—but it wasn’t the finger; he could feel that it was magic, and when he blinked he could see the finger still rigidly straight in the air—but he blinked again and it was at an angle unnatural and sharp—

“I think you do know, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said, sounding bored, towering a few steps away. Quora flexed his wrist, the magic coiled around it twisting, and in turn the magic around Harry’s pinky finger coiled tighter and pulled, until one by one the joints separated—but no it wasn’t—they weren’t—God, he couldn’t—Harry buried his face into his other arm, trying not to look, trying to separate the magic from reality—but the magic pushing down on him flared again and suddenly there was a hand in his hair, yanking his head back—only there wasn’t, because Quora was still looming, his wand pointed lazily towards Harry’s outstretched hand, contemplating it as he might contemplate a tea spread.

“I can tell you are lying,” he went on. “I do not appreciate being lied to.”

“It’s not a lie!” Harry insisted. It came out breathlessly—the magic pushing and pulling him was pressing his throat into the arm still half-folded under him—but it was loud enough for Quora to hear and respond, to jab his wand forward and coax the magic wrapped around Harry’s arm to sink into the skin, boiling hot—

“It is certainly not the truth.” Quora’s thin lips peeled back, curling into a feral grin. “The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Mr. Harrigan. Do you solemnly swear?”

“I’ve told you—”

If he’d had enough of a voice left, the sound that left him then would have been a scream, but instead
it was a raspy, unintelligible sound, tearing itself from his throat, desperate to escape his body’s torment. He knew it was an illusion—he knew it—felt his occlumency holding fast—knew these sensations were something beyond his surface thoughts—sensed the magic forming the illusion and overriding his nervous system to communicate it to his brain—but as it was an illusion there was no limit to the amount of pain another of his fingers snapping could cause—no limit to the horror of watching the appendages gain new joints and hearing the pop as they broke—they were illusions, but illusions were fueled by the experiences and attention to detail of their twisted caster—and the taste of blood and bile in his throat, that was real—

“Really, Mr. Harrigan,” said Quora, twirling his wand in his hands idly. “There’s no need for this to be difficult. You know I will get the information one way or another, either by wasting your evening with torture or sending one of my Slytherins to follow him. They are so very ready to prove themselves, to redeem their standings after missing so much about you…”

Harry pressed his mouth into his crushed arm, trying to ground himself with that duller pain. Quora watched him for—a second? a minute?—before stepping forward. With a wave of his wand and a sharp burst of magic, an echo of himself took another step, black boot landing heavily on Harry’s already mangled hand, and Harry’s vision went black...

“Oh, none of that. Enneverate.”

Harry was aware that he was nearly hysterical with his sobbing. Quora—the real Quora, or, the real body, disguised as it was—crouched down, robes pooling around his ankles. One of those long-fingered hands came down to pry Harry’s jaw away from him arm, tilting it up to look into Quora’s steely grey eyes lined with a mask of pity. The skin to skin contact burned up Harry’s magemetry, the sense translated into pain because everything was pain but paired with that strange drifting sensation Quora’s magic inspired, even as constrained as it was by the man’s iron-clad control.

And then Quora, in a display of strength Harry wouldn’t have expected from that aging, borrowed body, yanked Harry’s chin up further, and further, pulling until he’d lifted Harry up off the ground and Harry’s legs dragged limply forward, his strangely bent hand scraping painfully across the stone, and when he lowered Harry back down again it was into a slumped but somewhat upright position, and the hand kept Harry’s head up and his face tilted back to look towards the man’s blurred face. There was no point in trying to strengthen his occlumency—if he hadn’t already, Quora wasn’t even trying to break it now—but if he did Harry would be at his non-existent mercy.

“Harry, Harry,” Quora said softly, his voice smooth and coaxing, in a way Harry knew—why did he know that horrible voice? “You are making this so difficult for yourself. You know I would not send a Slytherin after him. That’s what I have you for.” He stroked Harry’s cheek thoughtfully, leaving trails of magic crawling on Harry’s skin behind the tips of his fingers. “I am a good teacher, Harry, when my students want to be taught. And it is so disappointing when a student is blocking his own progress. But there are ways around that.”

He sighed tragically, even as his nails dug into the soft flesh of Harry’s cheek. Harry wasn’t even sure if it was real or an illusion, with the magic so confused—if that was blood or sweat or tears or pain or fire running down his face—

“Should we go back to option one? Imperio is not the only obedience spell, though it is certainly the most direct, and they can be layered in the most interesting ways. Of course, it worsens the effects, but I know a particular ritual that will separate out your mind as a passenger in your own body. Fascinating, isn’t it? Pity it is permanent.”

Harry could only shudder, squeezing his eyes shut as Quora plucked the glasses from his face, the handle of his wand brushing Harry’s cheek with its own alien magic, and he retched, but the nails
digging into his cheek held him firm—then the hand holding the glasses shot down, pressing into
Harry’s ruined hand, and he writhed—

“But no, I think I should stick to the spells that merely remove your inhibitions, so that when we call
your dear Hector up here, it will still be you casting the spells, really. When your crucio works, it
will because you really mean it, and it will bring you joy to hear him scream out his secrets, the
secrets that you would not tell, to spare him, and he will discover what it is like to suffer at the hands
of someone he trusts, as you tell me what will make him break—”

“This brother!” Harry cried, before he could stop himself.

The wight pressing his hand into the stone floor lessened. After a long moment, the long fingers
wrapped around Harry’s hand, and brought it up almost gently, though the grasp was in and of itself
a threat—how easy would it be for those fingers to squeeze—

“His brother?” Quora repeated, voice barely loud enough to hear. “Hector Smithe doesn’t have a
brother. His family is his father and that filthy muggle woman.”

Harry flinched at the disdain in his voice. The momentary relief from the overwhelming pain gave
him the clarity of mind to curse himself for speaking, for giving him anything—

Hector had trusted him with that story, and here he was, not a month later, giving it all way—

“Shall I call Mr. Smithe in, and ask him to explain? Even if his brother is a mudblood squib, he
should still be on the Smithe family registry, and yes, people have checked… So do tell me, Harry,
what it is you mean.”

Clenching his jaw, Harry stayed stubbornly silent, until the nails started pushing into his cheek again,
and Quora—curse him for knowing Harry’s weaknesses—let his fingers blaze with magic, not
casting but just there, and his, and burning—

“He’s—dead.”

Harry’s voice was quiet, but the magic cooled, for a moment, just enough that he could think. A
moment later Quora chuckled, just as soft as he spoke, a sound that filled Harry with confusion—
how was Raj’s death funny—but he didn’t dare open his eyes to see if there was some other hint
why—

“Perhaps it would be tactless to ask him directly, then,” the man mused, his thumb swiping at a fresh
trail of blood running down Harry’s cheek. “So you’ll just have to answer for him, won’t you? To
save him the emotional turmoil of such a thing, of losing a brother. When did he die, Harry?”

“He—he said—third year. Three years ago—he said—”

The hand squeezing his moved until Quora’s wand was brushing Harry’s cheek, the fingers there
moving aside to let the tip graze the marks they had torn in his skin, and once again Quora’s magic
flared and Harry tried to move but there was still that strong grasp keeping him still—

—and his magic, this magic that Harry was in equal parts terrified of and drawn to, washed over his
cheek like a cool cloth, and the blood slid slowly back where it came from, and the skin began to
sew itself shut… Harry was so startled by the sudden gentleness he allowed his eyes to open again,
and found himself transfixed in terror at the wand, more threatening a weapon than a knife, so close
to him, that even though he could feel the magic and the nature of it he could not tear his sight from it
to close them again, though he knew he should, he really should…

“And this brother. What was his name?” Quora asked.
“Raj,” Harry rasped.

“And why have I not heard of this Raj?”

“He was—he was—”

The words became trapped in Harry’s throat as he stammered, caught between the part of his brain screaming that he should not tell, and the fear that consumed him and begged him to do whatever it took to escape Quora’s mercy. Quora pulled the wand away from Harry’s healed cheek, but only far enough to press the tip of it into the soft skin under Harry’s chin and tilt his face up, and blurred as his vision was without his glasses and the unwanted tears that he felt pathetic for not being able to keep back—never mind that they were perfectly a normal response to the sort of physical and mental stress he was under—Quora’s eyes were still sharp and clear.

“There are but two paths from here, Mr. Harrigan. You speak and I listen, or you don’t and I tear open your mind and perhaps do a little rearranging to make you more amenable to speaking in the future.”

Could legilimency do that? Harry didn’t think legilimency could do that—but if it was at all possible Quora would be the one to know how. And he definitely didn’t need any more rearranging in his head—or Quora to find out what he’d done…

“He killed himself,” he choked out.

Quora pulled his wand back, and finally released his grip from Harry’s face, letting his chin fall down towards his chest. “Go on. Why haven’t I heard of this no doubt tragic story?”

Harry flinched. Story—it wasn’t just a story. It was tragic, but someone like Quora would never understand that, except in terms of advantages and weakness.

“He… he was a muggle,” Harry mumbled. “Hector’s half-brother. From when… when his mother was married, before, in India.”

He cut off again as Quora took Harry’s hand into the one that had been grasping his jaw a minute before, joggling it in a way that made it flare with sudden bruising pain. Had he—Harry couldn’t rightly keep track of what had been an illusion and what hadn’t. Had his fingers actually been…

“And when did he die?”

“Third year…”

“Do speak up, Mr. Harrigan. Why?”

“He… Raj had trouble in school, he didn’t know… Hector said he…” The magic flared again, and Harry reflexively tried to pull away, but again was held in place, the tight grip painful. The tip of Quora’s wand hovered just above the first knuckle of his index finger, a spell waiting to be cast, and Harry swallowed.

“Said he’…?”

“Killed himself with… with potions.” Harry squeezed his eyes shut again. Perhaps it wasn’t so bad as being hurt, but the sudden warmth of comforting, healing magic as he gave news of a suicide was horrible in it’s own way, inspiring a new sort of nausea. Occlude, he told himself firmly, and tried to detach from the information he was—God, he was—“He took—he took as many potions as he could. Hector’s father does medical research. He had—they—Hector was flooed to St. Mungo’s. His
mother—she couldn’t… visitation laws. His father was trying to get her in. Hector was… he was alone with Raj. When he…”

Quora was apparently done with Harry’s hand, because he set it back down on the stone floor, with a horrible gentleness. It didn’t hurt anymore, and wrapped in traces of Quora’s magic as it was, it seemed to burn with that overwhelming, unnamable sense of—of power? He couldn’t think straight enough to check it.

“Why?” he asked instead, a whisper. “Why do you want to know?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

Quora reached forward, tilting Harry’s head back again. Harry kept his eyes trained angrily down, away from the blurred shadows of Quora’s gaunt face, as Quora’s fingers found their way under Harry’s fringe, tracing the stretched line of the scar high on his forehead, where this had all started. Harry cursed it, and cursed whatever had marked him with it, and cursed Quora for noticing it at all.

“Information is a tool, Mr. Harrigan. With the right information, it becomes possible to affect the outcome of the future. In knowing about Mr. Smithe, for example, if down the line I come to need something from him—or you—with enough of an understanding of him it will be possible to sway him to do as I intend without his even knowing it. It is simply a matter of framing things in the proper light, so that whoever it is understands that what I want is really what they want as well. Or if they might be of use to me, offering a way to get what they want is a simple method. And that begins with knowledge.”

“They’re people—their own people—not pawns.”

The finger tracing his scar sparked with magic, briefly—just enough to sting, just enough to duplicate Harry’s blurred vision, so an army of Quora’s crowded before him. Harry gagged—more than one Quora? One was bad enough.

“Perhaps,” Quora merely hummed. He brought his other hand up, and with it Harry’s glasses. Harry tried not to flinch as the man slid them onto his face—it was always unsettling to have someone else do that, let alone like this—but Quora still had a firm grip on him. “And perhaps, unlike you, they will have the sense to see that Lord Voldemort is generous, and won’t need any further persuasion. If that’s the case, then information merely serves as an insurance policy, that we understand who is asking to join us, that they do not come hiding potentially dangerous history or… motivations.”

“They—would never—join you,” Harry rasped, louder, glaring at the sharpened black shape of Quora’s shoulder. “They’re decent people, not—monsters—”

There was a silence for a moment, and then, finally, Quora released him entirely, slowly rising to his feet. This time Harry kept his head up, defiant against the idea, against his weakness, against this horrible man.

“Oh course not,” Quora said coldly. “No, the only real monsters are the ones like you: those who claim to be so loyal yet lay their secrets at my feet—and me: those who make no effort to deny it. The rest are but sheep, or lambs. As we please. And only some monsters have to strength to take control of their own power.” He slowly, deliberately, lifted his wand just enough to angle it at Harry, and drew on the magic without disguise, so Harry would know it was coming, know and not be able to stop the—“Crucio.”

Maybe after everything that had been done to Harry already, it should have been less effective, that spell of only pain. It wasn’t. It was agony, and when it cut off, Harry was still shuddering against the
floor, failing to hold back his whimpers, and when Quora stepped over Harry his robes brushed across the twitching body, and, halfway out of his mind already, Harry felt like he was being dragged through broken glass, never mind that it was Quora moving, not him—

The breath struggling to fill his lungs like dragon fire running down his throat in short bursts, the high pitch of his wheezing and pressure in his face his body’s cry that he needed air—and even as Quora stepped up the short stair and lowered himself into his chair, drawing it towards him to watch from the side of the desk, Harry felt like the weight of his own body was enough to bruise him against the floor—and in a way it was more horrifying, knowing that he had bothered with the illusions and psychological tactics, when with a single spell he could do more damage than what had prompted Harry to give up Hector’s secrets...

“Three times in a week, Mr. Harrigan. You really should take care.” Quora said when Harry’s breathing had evened to something of a steady rhythm, even as his heart struggled to remember its intended pace. “Do you know how the Cruciatust works?”

There was a long pause, as Harry tried to make sense of the question. What did it matter. Why did any of this—

“Answer me.”

“How dramatic,” said Quora. “Oh, that would work, for those less versed in the language of violence. A beginner’s tool, you might say… But no, hate is not the fuel. How could it be? I do not hate you. No… you understand how the Dark Arts work, surely? They change us to something beyond the bounds of what certain people believe humans should be. Or, rather, we change ourselves, to be capable of them.”

Harry’s tongue darted out, brushing over his dry lips and tasting salt, only barely listening. The magic from the cruciatus lingered, static stinging across his skin, worsening as every twitch scraping his robes against him. It was interference, breaking the sense of magic into fragments difficult to interpret, a strobe light revealing only glimpses of his surrounding. He forced his eyes open, darting them towards Quora again. If this lecture turned into another demonstration…

Quora liked the sound of his own voice, at least, which was a blessing if only because it gave Harry the chance to recover before he inevitably trampled across the line of acceptable behavior again. He could bear Quora’s ranting as long as it went on; that was easy. Just don’t say anything else, he urged himself. Quora couldn’t keep him here forever. There had to be an end to this. He’d gotten what he wanted—so easily, he’d gotten it—

“No, it is not hate. Understand, most every spell has an opposing force to consider. I could stand in a room full of first years throwing stinging hexes at me and it would feel vaguely akin to a limb falling asleep, because their intent to annoy their teacher would be paltry in comparison to my self-control. Perhaps the Imperius is a better example: it is a confrontation of wills, meaning you, Mr. Harrigan, are quite certifiably stubborn as an ass… The Imperius is classified as an Unforgivable because it gives the caster an advantage, in theory. A caster without the proper acumen, the proper need to exert their control—well, as amusing as the results can be, it is a different sort of beast from the Cruciatust.

“Yes, the Cruciatus is the most, ah, emotional of the Unforgivables. It doesn’t like any doubt or hesitation or empathy, no; it must be fueled by pure things—hate, anger, pleasure. Instinctual desire to inflict pain onto the victim. You see, she thrives on giving us what we want, and while you are being held under her, she is amplified by her victim’s emotions.”
He watched Harry through heavily lidded eyes, his voice and Harry’s shuddering breaths the only sound in the room. “Fear, Mr. Harrigan,” he said after a suitable pause. “She thrives on fear.”

It was easy for Harry to hold his tongue this time. What could he possibly say? There was no denying he was afraid—and why would he, when that would only encourage Quora to lash out again?

“Perhaps one day you will become a student of the Dark Arts,” Quora mused. “You have already delved, after all. Dipped your feet. But it is different, to use the Unforgivables. To use crucio properly, we must first unlearn what is to find horror at one another's pain. And then, when the shackles of empathy are gone, we do not need hatred.” He looked down at Harry with a wretched amusement, the ghost of a smile haunting his lips, a foul spark in his eyes. "Or so I have been told. You have said I am a monster, for the suffering of others does not trouble me, but for when it hinders my plans. And that is only when a problem when it cannot be overcome by legilimency or imperio, for my patience is hardly infinite.”

It was at the mention of legilimency that Harry realized his eyes had drifted up to meet Quora’s. He tore them away swiftly, delving into his own mind, making sure—Quora hadn’t—when he was under the Crucius had Harry let them—

Quora chuckled. “Oh, I see your horror; you don’t need to occlude. You let everything show on your face. I don’t need legilimency; it is simply a tool that speeds up the process when I grow tired of stubbornness. As you have demonstrated, pain utilized correctly is enough to get what I want.”

The threats were implicit, but Harry curled closer to himself. “So that’s your tactic? You break all your followers down so they are so afraid of you, you don’t even need to use the curse?”

“Oh, no,” said Quora. He sounded almost delighted. “I don’t break anyone who might be of use to me. So long as you have that scrap of defiance, you can prosper and grow—and your fear will be all the greater for it. No,” he chuckled again, eyes glittering unnaturally, even as he was nearly silhouetted against the window. “I don’t break my allies. That I leave for my enemies.” He leaned forward, propping his chin on one hand. “Them, I can torture with impunity, as I lose nothing when they break. Sometimes I even gain an ally afterwards. Or, as you would put it, a minion. A cheap investment with little risk, as once they are broken, their worth is only what there might be left of them to profit from before they die.”

Somewhere along the lines in the afternoon of suffering, Harry seemed to have lost track of reality. How else could he explain this, this—insanity? Insanity being shared, explained in great length, with him?

“I told you already: it is simpler and more productive to offer potential followers what they think they want. There is rarely anything beneath our means. You will see, soon enough.”

Harry bit his cheek, refusing to shake his head, to give Quora any more encouragement. If this was his recruitment method, he would fail. There was nothing Quora could offer him, not when Harry could taste the metallic tang of blood and feel the muscles in his back and neck twinging with the stress of keeping Harry upright. Quora promised pain without any thought that it would keep someone away. His arrogance was overwhelming.

But then there was a burst of magic, and Harry’s breath left his throat. He wasn’t prepared—he couldn’t— not again, please—

The chair was back, whole again, and Harry felt himself lifted in the air. He didn’t even have the energy to put up a token struggle as he was pulled forward by Quora’s spell, feet knocking into each
of the steps, and deposited back where he had started. Quora took his own chair back behind the desk, and rested his arms on it, one hand up and tapping against his chin, the other rolling his wand back and forth on the desk with his thumb. When the magic settled, Harry folded his arms around himself, glancing up and watching Quora’s tapping hand.

The silence stretched out between them, both watching, waiting. Back at the beginning. "That scar on your hand," Quora said at last. "How did you get it?"

Harry slowly looked down at it, reading for what felt like the first time the words that shone silver against his freckle-spattered skin. *I must not tell lies.* "It was—" he started, but he stopped just as abruptly. He didn’t know, but he—it was his handwriting. Had he done it himself? Why? He grasped for answers, but a dull ache was blooming in his head…

What was he doing? Whatever it was, Harry had hid away the memory for a reason. Quora couldn’t have it, if Harry couldn’t. No matter how he tried to coax it out.

“I really couldn’t say,” Harry said, letting his tiredness creep into his fragile voice.

He could feel the man’s gaze, but being stared down hardly seemed something worth wasting discomfort over. If Quora was going to start again, over something as small as a scar Harry didn’t have answers about—a scar not even worth disguising, despite how uniquely identifiable it was—what could Harry really do about it? What was the point protesting?

“That is your handwriting.”

"...yes."

“A blood quill, perhaps?”

Harry didn’t bother replying. Quora’s guess was as good as his. Better, perhaps, because while he could get an idea of what a blood quill was by the name, he would not have thought of that.

“You are a curious person, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said after a moment. “You claim to be disinterested in the Dark Arts, but you’ve an unidentifiable curse scar on your forehead, you’ve been trained to resist the Imperius, you’ve delved into legilimency, and apparently have been taught a lesson with a blood quill, of all things. Just what sort of coven did Dumbledore send you to?”

Harry kept his eyes on his hand. He didn’t need his memories or Quora’s uncanny intuition to know he had been at Hogwarts, and that it had still been under Dumbledore’s control. It shouldn’t surprise him to think he’d had contact, not when Quora was here, casting Unforgivables like there were household charms, and Dumbledore was none-the-wiser, but… Until Quora had showed up, Harry had the strange idea that Hogwarts was *safe.*

How naive that seemed now.

At last Quora sighed, and let his hand fall, folding into the other in front of him. “Well, Mr. Harrigan, our work is cut out for us. We will have to work on your pain tolerance,” he mused, leaning back in his chair, clasped hands following and settling over his stomach, leaving the wand behind. “If this were an interrogation with information that truly mattered on the line—information that might jeopardize my security, or the identity of any of those in my service, your failure to withhold it would be unacceptable.

“And I do hope you have learned your lesson regarding withholding information from me,” Quora went on. His eyes narrowed as he regarded Harry, as though challenging him. “When I ask you to tell me about people, I don’t particularly care if they’re your friends. You will answer, completely,
Harry shook. Not nodding, not answering. He wanted to snarl back that he wouldn’t give Quora anything—but the thought of any of those spells again… He wrapped his arms tighter around himself, and stared into nothingness.

Quora sighed again. “Get out, Mr. Harrigan,” he commanded sharply, and with a flick of his wand, the room was unlocked, and the wards relaxed, opening up around the door like the bricks at the entrance to Diagon Alley. “If anyone asks, you have a migraine. I wouldn’t suggest trying to explain how this afternoon has actually gone, unless you would like to add an actual migraine on top of everything else.”

...leave? Harry’s breath caught in his throat, and, against better judgement, eyes flicked up. He could—just leave? Walk out of here, like nothing had happened? Quora would let him—

“Don’t forget your bag,” Quora added, gesturing to where Harry had left it slumped against his previous seat. When his hand fell, it went to one of the folios still resting on his desk—the essays Harry had been grading, and he pulled it in front of him, uncorking the bottle of red ink with a flick in its direction. “You’d rather avoid this office until you are required back next Wednesday, I’d imagine, and I am too busy for any interruptions.”

Harry stood on shaky legs, half convinced that Quora was going to pick up his wand and send him into some new horror. An hour ago he might have tried to hide his weakness, not to give Quora the satisfaction—but Quora did not care, and he’d seen Harry at his worst, now, and at this point Harry had nothing left to lose. He stumbled down the steps, pointedly not looking for dark spots flecked across the stone floors, and grabbed his bag. Maybe he had too many books in it. Maybe he was just weak. His arms struggled to hoist it high enough to get the strap over his shoulder.

Behind him, Quora’s quill scratched against parchment. The bag seemed to drag Harry down, but he made it to the door. Put his hand on the knob and twisted; it opened compliantly. Stepped out, through the wards, feeling as Quora disappeared behind them, and the rest of the school’s magic brushed cautiously against his own. Pulled the door shut, the latch settling with a click.

Harry took off down the stairs and ran.

Chapter End Notes

(...sorry, Harry.)
What he was supposed to do?

Somehow, despite his panic, of running without a destination in mind except away, Harry found his way back to the Room of Requirements and slipped through the half-hidden door into the altar room, falling to his knees as it clicked shut behind him, his breath coming in reedy bursts. That was—he was—

What was he doing here? Still—at Hogwarts? Why hadn’t he—

He should run. Properly. Out of the castle, as far as he could go, and—

And what? Wait for Voldemort to track him down and… without any of the restrictions that being in the castle placed on Quora…

Not that there were many. Harry had just been—been tortured—and Quora hadn’t even been angry. Friday’s encounter had been terrifying enough with only)—only!—the Cruciatus… if the two were combined, anger and intent…

He shuddered. Don’t think about it. It would only make it worst. He didn’t need to relive any of that, to remember what had happened to him, what he had done…

Hector. Merlin, Hector. How could Harry—

Occlude, he told himself. He might even have said it aloud. The command did him little good, because he was tired and aching with pain that—he didn’t even know if it was real. He ached with the memory—and he didn’t know if his fingers had really been broken or not. Maybe illusory pain couldn’t be healed the same way. Maybe Quora had healed with the intent to leave them hurting—

It didn’t matter… the pain and his—his weakness were what mattered…

He was sobbing, and he couldn’t bring himself to stop, because he could not stop until it was over. And while Quora may have sent him away, while Harry may have been as alone and secluded as he could be in Hogwarts, while he might be sitting here doing nothing but sobbing and shaking, it was not over. It would never be over, not while the memory remained, not while Quora’s voice, smooth and coaxing and dangerous, still echoed around Harry’s head. Not while he could feel the pin-prickling echoes of the Cruciatus crawling up and down his arms. Not while he could not fully fold his fingers, because of the aching pain. Not while beyond that door and down that hall Quora’s office burned like a beacon in his mind, impenetrable to even his mind, no matter how hard his senses scrambled against the wards…

It wasn’t until much later that he realized he must have cried himself to sleep, as he woke curled around his bag and shivering from a dream that might have been a recent memory—it was all blurring together, even so soon. He tore his mind from the office wards and focused on the Room, on the here and now. It was night—late, Harry imagined, as the grimy window let in only a faint block of moonlight, which fell perfectly over the items on the altar. The dish mounted on the wall glistened with it, and, below, something new had joined the display: two dishes, simple and plain; a plate
stacked with some sort of bread roll and a bowl filled with water. Harry stared at it, wondering when
the magic of the room had shifted enough to bring it in—discarding that as an unnecessary train of
thought—wondering what requirement had brought the new items—forgetting his wonder when his
stomach let loose a loud groan—wondering what he was supposed to do with the bowl of water—
catching a glimpse of himself reflected in the bowl, jumping at the folding of magic and sudden
appearance of a hand-towel, wondering no longer.

The water, when he touched it—after crawling forward on his knees and setting his glasses aside and
pushing back his sleeves—was hot. Not painfully so, but just this side of it. And it clouded quickly,
as he dragged his hands through the surface, but when he hastily withdrew the clouded bits swirled
and folded in on each other and disappeared, a gentle pulse of magic running through the bowl and
rendering it clear once more.

Harry stared for a moment, then tore off his glasses. The plate of bread and protests of his stomach
suddenly were forgotten as he snatched up the hand-towel, dunked it in the water, and scrubbed at
his face until his cloth was covered with scum. And then he dunked it in the bowl and watched the
water swirl until it ran clear, only then he scrubbed at his face again, followed by his neck, and his
hands, and then back again—

Clear. Clean every time. And yet him… He felt no cleaner before. He was… dirty. He was—

Harry’s stomach twisted, letting out a gurgling, and he forced himself to stop. His hands at least
looked clean, so he took one of the buns. There way they were stacked, they looked like an offering
—but this was the Room of Requirements: it summoned them because Harry was hungry. He bit into
the first bun before he could change his mind—it was dense, moist, and slightly sweet, coming
together into a bread unlike any he could remember having before. The crust was several shades
lighter than the contents, smooth and firm but not tough to bite through, and three cuts had been
made in the top, exposing a triangle of the brighter bread inside. He ate two, the first ravenously, the
second with a bit more care. They were filling; two was all he needed, really, and besides…

It felt wrong to even consider taking more than he needed. Though he had come here twice now, he
did not know what the shrine was dedicated to, or if his presence and curiosity were an invasion. The
Room had provided for him, but it still felt like a space that existed solely for someone else. Whether
or not that person was even still alive, he was trespassing on their secret…

But he couldn’t bring himself to leave. Nor did he feel any guilt for what he had eaten. No guilt or…
anything else, really. The Room knew what he needed better than he did, at the moment, and he
would take what it provided, even if he could not complete whatever ritual the altar might have been
there for.

The room did not provide him with any form of cushion or comfort when he curled up on the floor.
His robe and cloak were enough to keep him warm, and he wasn’t—well, it didn’t feel out of the
ordinary, to sleep in such an awkward place. He lay on his side, knees folded close to his chest, and
eventually settled his head on his bag, never mind the jutting edges of the books inside, watching the
dust on the floor stir with every breath and wishing for nothing more than to think of nothing. He
brought up what he could of his occlumency shields, building the walls strong and silencing, but
even so…

The door at his back felt like the only real shield between himself and the rest of the world. A thick
slab of wood, sure, but only wood, to guard him. Even if he could muster the energy to go out there,
and the will, as he was he couldn’t imagine getting more than a few steps without crumbling under
the fear. And his own guilt lay beyond those doors. Waiting.

His shoulders hunched, and he curled into himself. Now that he was here, how was he ever going to
leave? The Room could feed him. It could keep him safe, to some extent, or at least provide some form of shelter.

If nothing else, it could give him a place secluded from—from everyone. A way not to return to his dorm. A place without Quora.

Or so he thought—when he did finally drift off to sleep, it wasn’t the escape he had hoped for. Quora was there—and Voldemort, who, for all Harry had only seen once, was visible in clear details: not a dark hair out of place, his cheekbones high and pale skin unmarred by smile lines or crow’s feet, his dark eyes glinting with an unnatural fire, his black robes fitted and tailored for movement. Beside Quora, he looked almost youthful, though he couldn’t be that young—and his magic: there it was. Overwhelming and enticing, both. And the two men were arguing over something, every now and then pausing to gesture to Harry—

He was on the floor, still, unable to take control of the shakes that plagued his body, looking up at them.

“You have to break them,” Quora was saying. “You don’t get true obedience without it.”

“We don’t need unquestioning obedience,” Voldemort relied. “There are more than enough of those; we don’t need more bogging down the ranks. And though breaking can be enjoyable, when it comes down to it, better someone with a bit of strength left to build on.”

“But you can never know,” Quora insisted. “Complete and utter obedience comes only from the fear born of—”

“You think he doesn’t fear?”

Voldemort turned, now, ever so slightly, to look down at Harry.

“Look at him,” he said. “I did not need to break him in order to get the answers I needed.”

Harry shrunk back, away from him and his dangerous magic. The Dark Lord smiled down at him, and it took him only one impossibly smooth step to be beside Harry, crouching down. He reached out and smoothed the hair from Harry’s brow. “He told us everything we wanted to know, after I asked nicely. Didn’t you, Harry? You do enjoy helping us out.”

Harry wanted so badly to slap away the hand touching his face, to scream, No! No, you bastard—

He didn’t. He whimpered, and tried to shrink away more, but Voldemort’s hand tightened around his fringe, and pulling just made Harry hurt his own head.

“Besides,” Voldemort said, “He’s a human. ‘Breaking’ him would only require a tighter collar and leash, for the inevitable stab in the back. This way, we need only find the proper incentives, and a profitable deal can be made.”

Quora snorted. “Oh? Profitable for who?”

“All parties involved, I’m sure.”

“It seems to me you will be cutting a loss, my Lord,” said Quora. “He’s pathetic—disagreeable, disobedient, and dares lie to you—a disgrace to the name wizard, and that’s not even considering blood…”

“Yes, the disobedience is something to work on,” Voldemort mused. And then he shifted, ever so
slightly, so that his palm was pressing more firmly into Harry’s forehead, right over where the scar would be, and called on his magic—

Wandless, wordless Cruciatus—it would be impossible to believe if it were anyone else, but with Voldemort, with all that magic wrapped around him—but that’s what it had to be, because what else would make him hurt like that—

*It’s only a dream,* Harry tried to remind himself, but ‘only a dream’ didn’t mean much when his body remembered so vividly—

And then it was over, Voldemort’s hand pulling away as he stood. *Only a dream,* Harry reminded himself, because it wasn’t real, this pain. He’d wake up and it’s fade away, quicker than a memory—if only he’d wake up—

“Curious,” Quora said, and Harry’s eyes darted to him. The expression Quora wore was… well, it wasn’t one Harry was familiar with on that face. There was a gleam in his eyes, a certain look about him, like—like an owl spotting prey in the distance, losing all notice of its surroundings as it stared. Keen and hungry.

Harry tried to back away, not knowing what to expect from that look and so fearing the worst. But the Cruciatus had set him flailing, closing the last inch, that gap between him and the wall, and pressing against it set fire running down his back everywhere that touched.

“Isn’t it?” Voldemort said. “He is not entirely without worth to me…”

“If he can be trained to withstand pain, perhaps,” Quora replied. “He’d spill everything in ten minutes, if Dumbledore’s people got their filthy hands on him. He wouldn’t even try to resist.”

“Well, as they say,” Voldemort said, gesturing back towards Harry. “Practice makes perfect.”

Quora’s face pinched a bit, but he nodded, and drew out his wand. Harry finally mustered the energy to move as Quora’s magic swelled, pushing himself up and rolling aside, whimpering, as Quora’s spell collided with where he had been—but the man was no amateur; he cast again, and Harry hurt too much, his limbs feeling like lead slowing his motions, and time seemed to slow down as the spell came rushing towards him—

“*Harry?*”

Harry startled awake, jumping to get away from the figure that crouched over him, hitting the wall and crashing into the altar and nearly upsetting the bowl of water. He grabbed for his wand but misses, flinching at the pain still haunting his fingers, heart pounding as he tried to get away from—

“Pandora,” Harry said. She stared at him, wide-eyed, wrapped in a pale night robe and a thin overrobe, seeming to glow, even in the strained moonlight. “I,” Harry started, his eyes darting around the small room, towards the door, where he half expected Quora and the Dark Lord to come rushing in, never mind that they—never mind. “Where—why—?”

“I can’t see him,” Pandora said, voice nothing more than a whimper. “I can’t. Something hides him. I couldn’t—”

Harry saw then that she was shaking, almost as much as he was. He frowned, stepping forward and holding out his hand, leaving it hanging in the air halfway to her shoulder. “Pan?” he says. “You—did you—did you…?”

“It never makes sense until it is too late,” she said, her words tumbling out in a rush. “Rarely. I
couldn’t see him. I didn’t—I couldn’t warn you. I didn’t know…”

Harry felt the blood rushing from his face. She was a seer. She had seen…

“It’s not your fault,” he said quickly. “You—you shouldn’t’ve had to see that, Pan. I…”

“It shouldn’t have happened to you!” She looked about ready to cry, and Harry couldn’t think of anything to say, because all he could think about was that she knew. She had seen him give in. Give up Hector’s secrets. And she was upset by what he’d seen, clearly…

“Tell me, Harry,” she begged. “Please. Tell me who it was. I can stop him, I can speak for you. Give me a memory to show. If you want me to, I can…”

Harry opened his mouth to tell her not to worry, but she was beyond worrying, at this point, and he wouldn’t be convincing anyone, as he was now, let alone someone who had seen it. And then her words caught up with him: she could speak for him. She had already seen what had happened, he just had to—

But the magic tightened like a noose around his neck, until at last Harry shook his head, and let it drop. There was nothing he could tell her. If she couldn’t see it… the contract was air-tight.

Pandora came forward and wrapped her arms around him, and for the moment, Harry didn’t care about the pins and needles her grip sent up his arms. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

“I brought you something,” she said, later, when they were sitting with their backs to the side walls, facing each other and searching for the right thing to say. She held out a small vial to him. It held barely a mouthful of a potion, pale and colorless in the grim light.

Harry didn’t recognize it. He glanced back up at her.

“Mensmaledus,” she said. “It’s… It’ll help you.”

“With what?”

“Recovering.” Pandora’s fingers toyed with the tie of her nightrobe. “It… It’s for a number of things. Muscle cramps… mood regulation…”

Harry flushed. “I’m not—”

“It treats symptoms, not the cause,” she said quickly. “Physical and mental pain both. Makes things run a bit smoother. It helps you… go about life like normal.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He looked down at the potion again. Normal. No matter what sort of potion he took, he didn’t think anything could make things be ‘normal’, right now.

“If you don’t want to take it, that’s fine,” she added. “I just… I don’t think you’ll go to Madame Pomfrey, and…”

“No, I can’t,” he muttered—whatever Quora had said, there was no way a healer like Pomfrey would accept a ‘migraine’ as an explanation of why Harry had excessive nerve damage. And when
he wouldn’t tell her, she would go to Dumbledore, and Dumbledore… well, he’d either go with legilimency or Veritaserum, and Harry didn’t know which one would be worse. Quora had said the gaes could be obvious without proper occlumency disguising it, and Harry had no clue how magic that forced him to tell the truth would mix with magic that prevented him from the same thing… Either way, it would at best be a headache, and probably enough to fix him with a real migraine for Madame Pomfrey to treat.

At worst, it would be the discovery of the Obfuscus, the shredding of his mind in the name of an aggressive approach to gleaning information, and the discovery by whoever was involved of his magemetry, that he was a time traveler, and everything he had been so desperate to hide.

No, he couldn’t go to Pomfrey, and while Pandora’s ideas were certainly… off-brand, they usually turned out alright. And she wasn’t the type to suggest something like this just to have a laugh. Before he could dissuade himself, Harry popped out the tiny cork with his thumb and downed it.

If he hadn’t felt the magic seeping into his body the moment he swallowed the potion, he might not have known it was working. There was no dramatic reaction, just a gentle warmth pulsing through him, spreading to his toes and hands—which still shook, but less frequently, and without the threat of flinging the empty vial across the room without meaning to.

Pandora let out a loud breath, and Harry realized she’d been holding it. She gave Harry a shaky smile, and Harry tried to return it, but he couldn’t manage it. He stared at her, and set the vial down carefully beside himself.

“Why are you helping me?” he asked.

The smile vanished.

“You must think I’m an awful person,” she muttered.

“What?” Harry asked. “No, I—if anyone’s awful, it’s—you saw what… what I did?”

Her brows pinched. “As much as you could, given the circumstances.”

Harry matched her frown—what did she think she had seen? “I did nothing,” he said. “I did nothing, and ran away, I—I’m a coward, Pan,” he whispered.

“I’d say you’re one of the bravest people I know,” she replied, but Harry shook his head.

“I—” he started. He choked, and swallowed, and started again, clenching his fingers until his nails dug into his shaking knee. “I gave up. I put Hector in danger.”

“Harry,” Pandora said slowly. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but Hector was in danger before you knew him, because of who he is, and what he believes, and how he was born.”

“But I gave up his secret.”

“Secret?”

“Raj.”

“...to who?”

Harry shook his head. “I…” He could feel the gaes flaring at the very thought of telling her. She knew—but not that, and the gaes, it seemed, was going to choke on every secret she didn’t know.
“It’s alright,” Pandora said quickly, but she bit her lip. “It might be rather cold of me to say it, but that’s not exactly the worst thing you could have done. It’s not that sharp of a weapon against him. Not anymore. And I’m sure he’ll forgive you, regardless.”

He shook his head, again, more intently, but his whole body was shaking. “You don’t understand. He trusted me, Pan,” Harry said. “He trusted me, and… I broke that.”

She reached forward and took his hand, gently peeling it from his knee, holding it with care for the pain he was still unsure if he actually felt. “When Hector told you about Raj, did he tell you my part in it?”

“He… he said you woke him up and took him to Flitwick.”

“Because I knew what had happened,” she said. “I’d known for weeks, in a way.” She flipped his hand over and traced the lines of his palm, and frowned at whatever the found there, closing his fingers over it. “When you see,” she said, her voice nearly too soft to hear. “When I see, that is—it isn’t just vision and sound. It is all-encompassing. I’m… there, in a sense. Sometimes I am just there, observing everything as it plays out, but sometimes… With Raj, when I saw Raj, I always was him. When that… it is difficult to make sense of another person’s thoughts, especially when you are thrown in with no time to adjust. I knew his pain, his fear, his loneliness, but not who he was.”

Harry swallowed. He couldn’t imagine… well, it sounded like legilimency, but on a much more intense level than anything Harry was capable of… and across time, too. He opened his hand again, letting hers fall into his palm. Pandora looked at it for a moment, then settled her fingers more comfortably, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“That night, I saw it from a different perspective,” she said. “From Vidya’s—from their mother’s. She heard a sound from the potions’ lab, but she knew Crius was upstairs. She found Raj, and—I, I’d met Raj. I recognized him. When the pieces come together… I went and got Hector and I took him to Professor Flitwick. I’d seen it before… I knew… He didn’t have much time.”

“I’m sorry you had to do that,” Harry said when she paused.

“Sorry?” Pandora looked up and blinked several times before her mouth twisted into a painful smile. “Don’t be sorry that I had to tell him. Be sorry for Hector, that I knew, and couldn’t save him. That I… couldn’t tell you.”

Harry’s grip on her hand tightened, suddenly, and the bolt of pain only made him grip tighter. “Did you—from my perspective, did you—?”

Her silence is enough of an answer, and this time it is Harry who throws himself forward. He’s not inclined to physical contact, but Pandora is, and it’s all he can do. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry, you shouldn’t’ve had to…”

“Neither should you,” she murmured. Harry slowly pulled away, studying her, wondering if her shivering hasn’t been from the cold after all. “Harry,” she went on, grey eyes finding his. “For me… it’s just a vision. It’s like… reading something out of a well-written book. Watching a portrait acting out a scene. It feels real, but when it is done, I can just… walk away from it. For you, it was real. There’s a difference.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” she said, more firmly. “It’s already leaving me. It’s barely more than a dream to me. But for you…” She swiped her thumb along his fingers, and finally let go, tucking her hands into her
sides. “It’s going to stick with you. That’s the difference, and, I just—I want you to understand, Harry. That… for the moment, I know better than anyone except you what you went through, how hard you fought. I… I could feel your desperation, your fear for Hector’s sake. I know you tried your absolute hardest, and… Harry, Hector would forgive you in a heartbeat, if he knew.”

Harry flinched. Hector, knowing—“I can’t tell him,” he said, and it was more than a fact, it was begging, hoping that Pandora would understand—

“I know it’s hard,” she said. “But I don’t want to see you wallowing in guilt over this, Harry. He would have given up the story himself, rather than see you hurt. He’d forgive you. He…” She took a deep breath. “He forgave me.”

“There was nothing to forgive.”

She smiled, painfully. “He’d say the same to you.”

Harry’s shoulders fell. She looked so earnest, waiting for him to accept her analysis, but while sure, Harry could imagine Hector, brimming with concern because worrying is what he did, saying the words without a second thought, the pain didn’t go away.

Maybe it wasn’t about Hector. It was an ugly thought, but… maybe he was clinging to the idea that he was guilty over betraying Hector not out of any real remorse, but because…

“I just… I never thought I was the sort of person who would give in,” he whispered. “… I can fight off the Imperius well enough, I can defend myself. But…” Pain? All it had taken was a few bloody illusions and Harry had given up…

And he had been so certain. So confident that all he had to do was cross the threshold into Quora’s office, last a few hours and possibly a crucio, and then he’d be out and ready to move onto the next inconvenience in his life. It had been a practical certainty that Quora would hurt him again—the other two times they had been alone in a room together, he had.

“Harry, I,” Pandora started. And then she stopped, looking queasy.

“What?”

“This was… one of those things I saw multiple times,” she said. “Mostly, from… from your viewpoint, but… I couldn’t see him to know, and… It was only tonight that I realized it was you he was attacking.” She swallowed, and her shoulders hunched. “Because tonight, I… I was him. I saw his perspective, and felt his… triumph. He… he actually feels some level of pleasure, doing what he did, and he…”

She let her head drop, blond hair piling forward, slipping off her shoulders. It was weird to see it so loose—usually, she wore at least a headband, and normally it was adorned with leaves or flowers or other decorations, but now… she must have just rolled out of bed. She wasn’t wearing more than a white nightgown and a thin blue night-robe over that, not even socks.

“He was difficult to understand, for me,” she said. "He... usually I have a pretty good sense of what is going on. I have lots of practice, understanding people, but he..." She trailed away. "There was only so much I could get. I might have forgotten the dream right away, had it not been you. He was so... He felt no guilt,” she added. “Only… ownership. Entitlement. He was… entertained by your defiance— Harry, it wasn’t your fault.” Her voice was growing stronger as she went on. “He’s a… a despicable excuse for a wizard. For a human being. And, frankly…. You didn’t really stand a chance against him. He knows what he’s doing, Harry, and he doesn’t care if what he’s doing it, is… Is
something that could damage you beyond repair.”

“But I still should have tried,” Harry insisted. “I shouldn’t have given in to it. I should have just said no. I should have—”

“Is ‘should have’ actually of use to anyone?” Pandora asked. “Harry, you did as best as you could. And now… now you just have to decide what you’re going to do next.”

Harry stared at her for a moment, then shifted so he was back as he was before, fully propped up against the wall, and let himself slump against it.

“It’s not enough,” he whispered.

“But it’s all you can do,” she insisted. “And that makes it worth it.”

Harry glanced warily up. It was so dark in the Room, lit only by the one window, but he could see her face clearly enough. For a moment… he almost wished she wasn’t there. He should have wished that already, that she hadn’t seen anything, that she hadn’t felt that pain, even if she said it wasn’t the same—she just didn’t understand. He’d failed. He’d—

“Look,” Pan said, interrupting his thoughts. “I’ll try to… My Great-Great-Grandmother was a rather famous Seer—Cassandra Trelawney. Have you heard of her?”

Harry frowned. The name made something shift in the back of his mind, but it was beyond the shroud of the Obfuscus. He shook his head. It was a distraction, anyway, and he’d take that.

“Well, she was named after Cassandra, from the Greek legends. A prophet—the Trelawneys are more known for prophets—cursed that no one would ever believe her prophecies. It’s kind of a cruel name to give someone with the Sight, but it can also be useful… as long as people think their misgivings might just be a curse on the name. Anyways, supposedly, Grandma Cassy would only tell people the bad outcomes. She thought that so long as she warned people, they would take actions against things, whereas if she told them the better alternative, they would assume it would come to pass and take no action.”

Harry frowned. “And… how did that work for her?”

“Surprisingly well, all things considered,” said Pandora. “Of course, she was the laughingstock of the wizarding world, because as far as anyone could tell, none of her predictions ever came true… and she was executed by burning for inciting disorder for treason when she accused Lady Selwyn of conspiracy against the crown…”

“I thought you were trying to be comforting,” Harry said.

Pandora blinked out of her derailed train of thought. “What?”

“I—you were telling me how I did my best, and now you’re telling me about how your… great-grandmother was burned alive. That’s not exactly…”

“Oh. Well, after her death, they discovered her journals—she took copious notes on everything she Saw, and on her schemes for influencing the future for what she saw as the better. And they managed to catch Lady Selwyn in the act, which did aid things along. But my point is—you can’t just think about the end, Harry. It might not have ended well for her, but…”

She paused suddenly. “I don’t know how to put this delicately,” she admitted, with a bit of a yawn. “It upset Hector terribly, the first time I told him about it.”
Harry’s heart sank. This distraction was turning into something terrible. “Maybe another time?”

“It’s not that bad,” she said. “Just… most Seers’ lives are looked at as tragedies, because—Well, there’s a lot of death, in life. Most lives end in it, and there’s a lot of people in the world, and in the future. And… the way it works, sometimes you can focus it. By thinking about something a lot, you sort of… shape what direction that part of your mind looks. And since we’re human, and naturally self-concerned people, we tend to see a lot about our own lives. And our own…”

“Your own death,” Harry realized. “Jesus.”

“Yes, well. Mostly it’s something you come to terms with,” she said. “My mother knew she would die when I was born—she wrote me lots of letters on the matter, hoping that she could help me be okay with it, when I realized.”

“Pan,” Harry said. “That’s…”

Awful, he wanted to say, but she sounded so fond when she mentioned the letters…

Pandora shrugged. “That’s why people think we’re all tragic,” she said. “In any case, a seer with Grandma Cassy’s ability, she had to know she would be killed for what she was doing. And before that, she had to know she’d be ridiculed. And her daughters—historically, Trelawney witches haven’t married. Well, a few did, but they kept the name—anyways, her older daughter, Delphina, did both. She married my great-grandfather, Hector Fawley, and became Delphina Fawley, and it wasn’t until her youngest daughter made a prophecy about Grindelwald that she even admitted she was a Seer herself—but Cassy had been executed before that, so none of the Fawleys ever met her.”

“So… you’re saying that doing my best is going to make people I care about hate me until long after I’m dead?”

“No, I’m saying—I’m saying she knew it would be hard—she knew better than most people, and she still did it, because she had to do something.” She gave up stifling her yawn, after that, and pulled her hair all over one shoulder, combing through the loose curls with her fingers, working it into a braid of some sort. “I think you’re like that, Harry,” she added, as though realizing she’d forgotten to finish her thought. “I think you’re like Cassandra. It hurts and it’s hard and—” Another yawn. “—and you still do it because you can’t just do nothing when you see something wrong with the world, and—”

This time, her yawn cut off her sentence entirely, and she didn’t try to start it up again. And Harry wasn’t sure that was a bad thing, because he couldn’t see how what she was saying was a good thing. Sure, Pan was saying Cassandra was doing some abstract level of good, and—and catching some criminal he’d already forgotten, but… he looked at his hands. “What if I don’t care about any of it?” he asked. “What if I’m doing more harm than good, staying here? What if I just—I just can’t do it, Pan. What then?”

He didn’t get an answer, and when the silence stretched into the distant tolling of the two o’clock bells, he glanced up again and found her staring intently into nothingness, a stillness in her face that did not belong on a girl who made art projects out of her meals and argued fiercely for the rights of creatures who were underrepresented in magical society.

But what she said was simple: “Then you don’t.”

He opened his mouth to retort, only to realize he had no clue what to say to that. “I… don’t,” he echoed.
“Free will,” she said. “Typically the Sight makes us believe in that above all else. You have the luxury of choice.”

“That’s… You told me before that there are, um. Set points. Things that had to happen,” Harry said. “Shouldn’t that mean that free will—”

“Points are only tiny moments in time,” she said, sounding impatient. “People think they’re important because they’re easy. Quantifiable. But knowing that someone will die means significantly less when they’ve spent all their life hiding in fear of it than someone who’s gone out and lived in spite of it, don’t you think? Free will says you can do either. You can do your best to protect the people you care about, or you can…”

She frowned, then shrugged, her face clearing somewhat. She leaned her head back against the wall, closing her eyes, and murmured: “Or you can choose something else, and do your best at that, I guess. That’s what makes the difference.”

That was the problem that Pan didn’t seem to be getting, though. Here she was saying that what he did didn’t matter, as long as he put himself to it. But…

What he’d done was betray Hector’s confidence. Sure, he’d tried not to—and maybe, like Pan said, what he’d given up didn’t mean anything. But he’d still done it, and that, that was the problem. It didn’t matter what had happened leading up to it—well, it did matter, but Harry didn’t want to think about it, not… he didn’t want to think about it. It didn’t matter—what mattered was what happened.

But maybe that was what Pan was saying. Their viewpoints were flipped. When he’d read about seers and prophets, after she and Hector told him, all the books agreed that there were different degrees to which the Sight manifested—from an uncannily reliable intuition up to… well, the example had been a witch who had spent more time Seeing than living her own life. It seemed to Harry, at least, that it had manifested in Pandora pretty damn intensely, which meant…

To her, all of this must seem so small. Maybe she understood him more than he thought, because here he was trying to solve time travel and having violent run-ins with the bloody Dark Lord while in school. She might be seeing a different branch of the future every time she turned around, and…

And Quora was here looking to recruit.

Jesus.

If he controlled Harry, that was one thing. As long as the memories he had sealed remained untouched, as long as he was content with magemetry being Harry’s greatest downfall, then Harry would be, as Quora had put it, a tool, and nothing more. Not a big player in the war, just another pawn on Voldemort’s side of the chess board—if he controlled him.

Pandora, on the other hand… Harry couldn’t even begin to imagine what it would be like if Voldemort had someone like her. Beyond the destruction he could wreak, with her awareness of the possibilities of the future… Harry knew what would happen when she couldn’t provide the information Voldemort wanted. Or if she gave him a series of possible outcomes, but what really came to pass was not among them. Whatever in Harry’s past had given him the ability to break the Imperius, to… at least survive torture…

Well, she’d probably Seen things he couldn’t imagine, even with Quora breathing down his neck. But that didn’t mean she should have to face them herself. No one should, and yet, with him here, at the school, none of them were safe. Leastwise someone with a gift like that.
“If I asked you to come with me, would you go?” he asked.

Pandora lifted her head up from the wall to slowly blink at him, and Harry realized she might have dozed off. She rested her chin on her knees, and spoke sleepily: “Go? Where?”

“Away,” he said. “Somewhere safe.”

“Hogwarts is safe.”

Harry swallowed. “I haven’t left Hogwarts since October, Pan. This… I was here all day yesterday. At Hogwarts.”

Pandora stared at him, and for a moment her lids drooped, but then she shook her head. “Running only puts off the…” She paused to yawn. “Inevitable.”

“It buys time.”

“And Hector wouldn’t go, and I wouldn’t leave him.”

“He could come.”

“And the rest of Hogwarts with us? Until it is just Dumbledore and those loyal to the… the other side?”

Pandora shifted, pulling her robe tighter around herself, and Harry was beginning to wonder if he ought to give her, dirty as it was, his when there was a pop of magic that made them both jump and squint at the sudden brightness that had appeared on the altar ledge. The three candles had come to life. They were only small flames, and yet they seemed all at once to warm the room, not as Pandora’s potion had done, only warming him, but actually heating the room. There was some sort of magic in the wax—almost like rune enchantment, but Harry did not feel any particular runes, at least not any he could recognize.

“It’s different for you,” Pandora murmured. It took Harry a moment to remember what they had been talking about. When he looked back to her, the warm glow deepened the shadows on her face—the bags of exhaustion under her eyes. But they also reflected the fire with a sharp glitter. “For us, this is where we belong. Hogwarts is our home. We don’t abandon her when danger comes along our way. We stand up and fight, as much as we are able to.”

“I don’t think I can fight,” Harry said. “Not knowing—”

He was speaking without thinking, but before he could finish it, the gaes tightened suddenly around his throat. He might not have felt it, might not have gasped had it not been for his magemetry; he would have simply found that the words coming out of his mouth didn’t match the thoughts in his head.

“We can’t go with you where you want to go,” she said. “This is where we’re meant to be. You’ve gotta… got to figure it out on your own.”

Figure it out.

She made it sound so easy, so simple—and maybe it was. Maybe he just had to think through things logically, and then all his doubts would go away. Not bloody likely, but, hey, He had no idea what would happen if he ran, except that it would be not staying. Which was ideal, because staying—

What would happen if he stayed? Pain, Harry thought, because for all his snark about how Harry
should really avoid being tortured so often it had been Quora who was the one doing it in the first place, apparently without scruples, which was…

Illogical. Nothing Harry could understand, at least. That’s what made him so terrifying: his choices seemed entirely irrational.

Well, that and his proficiency with the Cruciatus.

But, no. It had to be something—you didn’t get to Quora’s position and power by being irrational. Whatever he was trying to achieve with Harry, there had to be a purpose. A goal in mind.

Or did there? After all… Though Harry was assuming he was in control, really, that was only in comparison to Harry’s complete lack of it. He may be terrifying—a monster, Harry had called him, and he stood by that—but in the end… he was nothing more than human.

When Quora had arrived at Hogwarts, he hadn’t expected Harry to recognize him. That had been the first thing to go against his plan, and… Discovering that Harry could sense magic couldn’t have been part of it, either. He’d had the contract written up already, and the gaes, but…

What would have happened, if Harry hadn’t known? He might have been more in control of himself, more able to say ‘no’… but Quora would’ve gotten his way eventually. The contract… how easy it would have been for Quora to press him for time, so that Harry barely scanned it—or he could have just left the page aside while Harry signed it. And then, Quora could have revealed himself to Harry, after the fact—

Or he could have kept up the disguise. He could have impressed Harry with his efficiency as a teacher in Harry’s best subject, could have used nothing more than the authority of his position to command Harry, and slowly worked his way towards…

Whatever it was Harry had been thrown head-first into, instead. The first time he had used crucio, Harry would have been confused, betrayed—but Quora had that way of speaking that could make madness sound like reason. And if he tried to go for help, he wouldn’t have known why he couldn’t talk about what had happened, and if he hadn’t the first time, it would have been that much harder to seek out help the second, and then…

Had that been Quora’s plan?

He wondered if Pandora would know—she had been in his head, in a sense, after all—but when he looked over, she’d fallen asleep, her cheek pressed into her knee and her mouth hanging open ever so slightly. Well, it didn’t matter; he wouldn’t know how to ask her, that the gaes would allow it.

And it didn’t matter, because regardless of what Quora’s plan had been, what really happened was… a living nightmare. People weren’t built for this, this overwhelming hurt. Not for the physical pain, not for the mental. _Harry_ wasn’t built for it. He’d given in. He’d—

He’d let his mental control slip. The book he’d learned occlumency from had mentioned, briefly, how mastery could help maintain control under duress, but Harry was far from mastery. He was far from basic proficiency, even—on a good day. Right now, his shields were like stones scattered in a field where a wall had once stood, large enough to hide things behind but barely doing anything, really. And there was so much to hide, to forget—and who knew what was lurking behind those rocks? Quora had threatened to poison him with mental magic, and he’d already gotten the gaes on Harry. Who was to say there wasn’t anything else?

Well, actually, _Harry_ was. Magemetry did have its occasional benefits. He could feel the gaes around
his throat, and he could, if he really wanted to test his ability to bear headaches, trace the edges of the Obfuscus. If Quora had anything else on him, he would feel it… wouldn’t he?

Then again, maybe it could be hidden behind one of those fallen rocks, one of the TV-building blocks that he sometimes visualized, lying on the floor and playing only static. How could he know, unless he—

It wasn’t like he was doing anything more useful. Pandora had fallen asleep, and he didn’t want to follow her, and at least running through his mind he could try to rebuild a bit, to gain control of his emotions.

He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

- 

He wasn’t sure what finally stirred him. He might even have been dozing—a blessedly dreamless, but unrestful sleep, if it had happened—and slowly come back to himself. And by the time the bells rang—five o’clock—the ache in his hand had evolved from an afterthought to a reminder, and he wasn’t going to be drifting to sleep again anytime soon.

His stomach groaned, loud enough that it was surprising Pandora didn’t stir. After a moment, he shifted, leaning slightly to reach the stack of rolls and take one. The candles, still flickering with that disproportionate heat, had warmed the bread, and the lingering magic left a trail of warmth as he swallowed it. And it tasted as before, the body sweet and moist, and it quickly quelled the twisting of his stomach, but—

It still left Harry feeling empty. Not hungry, nor unsatisfied, but blank. He didn’t have the energy to enjoy it, or even to summon that vague guilt he’d had when they first showed up, that he shouldn’t be eating what looked like an offering at the altar. He just felt…

Pandora mumbled something, and Harry glanced towards her, but for all her brow was furrowed it was clear she was still deep asleep. He let out a long breath, swallowed the last of the roll, and leaned his head back against the wall, turning to stare at the three candle flames again. This should be better, he thought. Logically speaking.

It wasn’t. It felt like a big, empty well had been carved in his chest, and he was just waiting to see whether it would flood this time with fear, panic, sadness… No matter what, it would be too much, surely, for him to bear…

Pandora spoke again, this time much more quickly, and much clearer, though still softly. It seemed like she was getting upset over something. Harry frowned, wondering what it was she was dreaming of—but then, she was talking. He leaned forward until he finally made out the words—

“¿Ido? Él no puede…”

—but he couldn’t understand them. It was… Spanish, probably. He didn’t know that Pandora spoke Spanish.

...or maybe she didn’t. If this was the Sight in action, who knew how it worked. In any case, her expression was getting tighter, and her voice rougher, and her shoulders were so tense Harry imagined it was quite uncomfortable. And as she went on, her voice took on an element of panic…
“Pero… Pero, la profecía…”

She’d woken him before, hadn’t she? He couldn’t just leave her to stress out… right?

"Pan," Harry whispered. She didn't stir, beyond her mumbling. He tried again, a little louder: "Pan."

Her eyes blinked open, but for a moment, they were unfocused. "¿Sobrevivirá? ¿Volverá a nosotros?" she asked urgently. "¡Dime!"

"What?"

Pan blinked again, stared at him, confused. Then, in a much different voice, one soft with sleep still, she said: "Oh, Harry." She sat up straighter, shifting her shoulders to push back the discomfort of having slept sitting against a stone wall, and pressed the heel of her free palm against her eye, brushing the hair that had fallen loose from its braid away. "What time is it?"

"Just after five,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, and blinked some more. Then she closed her eyes and shook her head, and when she opened them some of the sleepiness had gone. “I should go.”

“What?” said Harry again. “I—I was waking you up because you were talking in your sleep. You seemed…”

She frowned. “A dream,” she said, getting that distant look again. “But it was… we were speaking Spanish, I think. I don’t know Spanish. It made sense in the moment, but…” She shook her head again. “Maybe I should learn.”

“Spanish?” Harry asked.

She gave him a puzzled look. “I really should go,” she said, not really answering. “You could go back too.”

Go back? Harry was shaking his head before he had even really considered it. “I can’t,” he said. “Not… not yet. I can’t… face him, Hector.”

“So I should go,” Pan repeated, standing, now. “Because someone has to talk him down. And… well, frankly, if neither of us comes back, there will be talk, and you don’t like extra attention, right?”

“Talk?”

“There’s already going to be, if you’re not coming back,” she went on. “I’ll tell them… you fell asleep doing homework. Well, I’ll tell Hector and Professor Flitwick that, since they’re going to be asking. You’ll have to tell anyone else.”

“Homework. Right.” He had plenty of that to do, but it sounded so… ridiculous, to do something like homework. What did it matter, in the grand scheme of things?

“I’ll deal with them,” she said. “So you won’t get in trouble. But there’s going to be questions, because they’re going to be concerned. Hector’s will be more personal, but Professor Flitwick’s will be harder to avoid—not that you should avoid Hector’s, but…”

“But I can’t tell him about any of this,” Harry concluded.

She shrugged slightly, looking away. “It’s not… a great idea to keep secrets, but…”
“But it would hurt him more to know.”

“It’s going to hurt him when he finds out you didn’t tell him, too,” she said. “But… It might be better. For it to be less immediate, so he can’t go charging into action without thinking.”

Harry didn’t say it, but he could see what would really be better: for Hector to never to find out. Pandora had, and it was… well, it wasn’t as awful as he might have thought, her knowing, but why burden Hector with that?

“Either way, you should decide before you come back to the tower,” Pandora said, turning to leave. “I’ll see you… tomorrow, probably, unless you come back early.”

Earlier he had had a brief moment of wishing that Pandora weren’t there—now, the very thought of her leaving was enough to send panic bubbling in his chest. She was stepping towards the door, and he was going to be alone again. Just him and his thoughts and questions without answers. And for all Pandora had come to tell him, she hadn’t really given Harry any reassurance about the future. And now she was leaving, and that meant he would have to solve his own problems, and he couldn’t. His voice rose in his throat:

“But what do I—”

But Harry stopped without completing his sentence. In truth, he wasn’t entirely sure what he meant to ask. ‘What do I do?’ No wonder there was an element of panic in Pandora’s expression. Imagine, being asked that question all the time, and being blamed for the outcome when things didn’t go over perfectly. He swallowed—but he couldn’t entirely push away his need to ask her—to ask anyone, really, except she was the only one he could ask—his unexpected confidant—

“Do you think I should run?”

Pandora tucked her hands into the folds of her over-robe, not looking back towards him. “As your friend, Harry,” she said carefully, “I should say yes. You’ve been hurt—I hate that. Staying is going to be difficult, and painful, and I wish I could save you from that—I could still tell someone, if you want me to?”

Harry shook his head quickly, then realized she wasn’t looking. “No, no—you said ‘should’. You should say yes.”

She stood silent for a long moment, and when she finally did speak her voice was grave. “I should. But I think you’ll know when it is time to go. And… when that time comes, I will do anything I can to help you. For now, all I can…”

She trailed away, one thought interrupted by another. And then suddenly she turned back towards Harry. There was a spark of determination in her eye, and she reached out with her right hand and took Harry’s shoulder. “This is what I can do for you, for now,” she said. “I’ll tell you—You’re going to go to him, and tell him I have a message for him—show him, even. That’d be more convincing, I think.”

“Show him?” Harry echoed, bewildered.

“The memory, of this. You are going to go to him, and when he asks about me, you are going to tell him that I am a seer—”

“Tell him?”

“—and that I prefer the company of elves to humans, and that my sight would only build them self-
fulfilling prophecies that would tear their coalition apart, and that he should remember what he has done to the Fawleys, and what he has done to you, my friend, and how he has aimed to blackmail Hector. If the Dark should try to claim me, I could demand the family seat. And as a seer on the Wizengamot, I would hold more power through blackmail and precognition than the Dark Lord or his inamorato could ever hope to gain. Imagine what damage I could do to their purpose."

“The Dark Lord or his— what?”

“Just tell him,” she said. “And make sure he passes the word along.”

“Pan,” Harry said, “I’m not going to help you threaten the bloody Dark Lord—”

“So you have gotten yourself mixed up in all that,” Pandora said. Harry blinked—but Pandora was shaking her head. “And the one who did this to you works for him, doesn’t he.”

Harry’s mouth opened, but it simply hung there. He… had assumed that she knew, before she said all that. Even if she didn’t know who Quora was—not his cover—he had assumed…and so, apparently, had the gaes, which flickered uneasily around his throat. She had tricked it—she didn’t even know the about it, and she had tricked it— Granted, she had probably been trying to trick him, which did put a damper on things, but… It was a bit of light, for the future. If he could find a way to let someone clever enough know about the gaes, then they could surely find a way to get the information out of him…

If they didn’t just go diving into his brain to find it.

Pandora’s hand dropped to take his. “I’m sorry, Harry,” she said. “But you tell him, or show him. That way he won’t bother you about me. You won’t have to worry about it.”

“Pandora, I’m not going to—”

It was back again, that deep dark horror—rekindled at the very thought of willingly letting Quora into his mind. The very thought of facing the man was enough to stir panic. His throat tightened, trying to hold back the sob pushing tears into his eyes.

“I don’t think I can do it,” he said. “What if I… what if I have to run?”

“Don’t give up hope, Harry,” Pandora went on softly. She looked, Harry thought, like she wanted to hug him again, and he was grateful that she did not, because as repulsed as he was by the thought of contact he wouldn’t have had the heart to turn away from that comfort again. “Your path is, I am afraid, always going to be tainted by turmoil and confusion, but you cannot lose faith. You must trust in your convictions.”

“And if I can’t?” he asked, voice no more than a whisper, as if it had been lost with his spirit—the only way he could bear to ask such a question aloud.

Pandora’s face slackened into something truly unhappy. He did not think he had ever seen her take that expression without watching her retreat into herself immediately after, and with a rush of loneliness sweeping through him, he wished he had not asked at all.

She did not leave him, however, but spoke, tone quiet and heartbreaking and true, her hand falling to his once again. “You could make it work, if you run,” she said. “You’ve got experience… I don’t doubt you could find your way wherever you go. But… If you don’t stay true to yourself, you would let your path out of your hands. You would leave your course up to fate, and your role in the world would cease to have meaning except for how your life fits into others’. In a way, you would cease to exist. Your life would be nothing more than a story for other people to shape.”
She shook her head and refocused. “The thing about seers,” she said, “is that we must believe in free will. If we don’t… it can drive us mad. What I’ve seen—” Her voice broke slightly, and her hand tightened. “Knowing possible fates can be a dangerous thing. Knowing that there are slim chances, and pushing for a certain result—pushing for it despite the fact that we’ve seen the lesser options come to pass before… It is difficult. But giving in, letting whatever happen, happen… giving up our influence on the world… that just ends in despair.”

“But I can’t… there’s no way I can… I don’t even know that I can survive, if I stay. It’s… it’s impossible, for anyone to live like this and make it worth something…”

“If it is too much, then you should go,” she said simply. “But only you can make that decision, Harry. I don’t see you leaving, but you don’t have to listen to me. Just…” She seemed to hesitate for a moment, then said: “Nothing is impossible. And you’re stronger than you know.”

Harry swallowed, and let his head fall. She and Hector… they had too much faith in him. He’d never done anything to deserve it… but she’d been right, before. No matter how he wished he could… he wasn’t going to run away. Maybe he wasn’t the person he thought he was. Maybe he was a coward who gave in to torture, who hurt others to save himself… but he wasn’t the type to run away from danger. Not when it counted. Not when he’d put Hector in danger… not when Pandora refused to stand out of harm’s way.

“I’ll try to believe you,” he whispered. “I want to believe you. If you can tell me you have seen a future worth fighting for…”

This time, she really did pull him into a hug. But while there was still a certain level of discomfort… she was strong. Stronger than you’d think, looking at her, and strong enough to have given all she could to help him, and still find ways to give more.

“There is always a future worth fighting for.”

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When Pandora left, the door clicking softly and the wood muffling the quiet steps of her bare feet into silence, Harry slowly turned around and sank to his knees, and sat there until his heart had stopped racing at the sudden fear being left alone. Pandora had come to him, and doubtlessly saved him a long night troubled by nightmares with no comfort or rational consideration, but as she said: she couldn’t stay here. She couldn’t just give him the answers he wanted, because she was just as out of her depth as he was, and while she might’ve been his savior, he’d said no. And so he was alone again. Him and his thoughts and someone else’s altar.

He fell back into his occlumency practice, at last, when rationalizing didn’t seem to be working, and shoved his panic behind the strongest shield he could muster. And when he opened his eyes again, he could hear the castle bells tolling. He’d lost over an hour, wrestling with that sudden burst of fear—Merlin. He needed to practice his occlumency. He couldn’t waste that kind of time dealing with petty anxiety, especially not out there, where he would be vulnerable!

There was no helping it now, though. He took off his glasses and found that the bowl of water was still hot as it had been the night before as he splashed his face. He didn’t bother to wipe it dry, but let the water run down his skin, let it chill in the cool air until it was cold enough to be uncomfortable. He needed it—needed to wake up. He was awake, but that wasn’t enough. He might not be
dreaming, but he could feel them waiting until he dozed, could feel the memories of yesterday lurking until his occlumency slipped. They scared him. The potential of them scared him, and knowing that was unbearable. If he—

He swallowed and clenched the robes at his knees in his fists. If he was going to stay, if he wasn’t going to run, he would have to face the bastard. He couldn’t spend all his time hiding, and he couldn’t show that sort of weakness to Quora’s face—but if the thought was enough to scare him.

Just… not yet. His occlumency was better than it had been, but that was a low bar to beat. He couldn’t face Quora—he couldn’t even face Hector. Not today. Which meant—

His stomach growled. The rolls, as sustaining as they had proved, were all he had eaten since lunch the day before.

That would be his first stop, then: the kitchens. He could figure out his next move while he ate, down there where it was safe—it had been safe enough on New Year’s Eve; it would have to be enough now. He grabbed his bag and hurried out before he could change his mind.

Of course, he was only about halfway to the kitchens before he realized that kitchens meant Hani. He’d not quite made up with her, for how cruel he’d been over the holidays, but Hani—Hani was like Hector. She’d see him, and she’d worry, and—

And he wasn’t going to turn back now. He couldn’t spend all day hiding in the Room. And he hadn’t betrayed her, the way he had Hector, so facing her, it would be good practice, right?

Or maybe she’d be obligated by her job to report what a mess he was to Dumbledore or Flitwick, and then Harry would be in real shit… Quora would be after his head...

Perhaps if he hadn’t been so preoccupied worrying about Hani, he would have noticed the group on the other side before the painting that hid the entrance swung open. Harry jumped back, but it was too late to avoid confrontation, and confrontation there would surely be: the first out of the kitchens was Sirius Black.

“What are you doing here, Harrigan?” he demanded the moment their eyes met.

Harry sighed. He really did not want to deal with this. After everything he’d dealt with in the last day, the Gryffindor’s vendetta seemed especially petty.

“Same as you, I expect,” he said blandly, taking a step back and eyeing the other ‘Marauders’ coming up behind Sirius. James and Remus looked… well, wary, yes, but tired, mostly. Much as Harry felt.

Sirius sneered. “Skulking about? Or just lost on your way to the dungeons, to meet up with the rest of your slimy Slytherins…”

“Right,” said Harry. “One: I’m Ravenclaw, if you hadn’t realized, not that ‘Slytherin’ is much of an insult, which you ought to know, considering your brother is one of them. Two: I’m surprised to hear you admit to ‘skulking about’. Very honorable. They’ll make a Gryffindor of you yet, Black.”

James grabbed Sirius by the arm before he could go for his wand. “Alright, lads,” he said, eyeing Harry. “Lets just all go our separate ways. Yeah?”

Harry shrugged, though he didn’t let go of his wand, even as he stepped back to let James pull Sirius away. He wasn’t even sure when he’d grabbed his—he wasn’t even sure that he’d be going for defensive spells, at the moment, if James hadn’t grabbed Sirius in time. Pettigrew followed closely
behind the other two, trying for a sneer as he passed but only succeeding to look vaguely nervous. Remus didn’t move.

“Harrigan,” he said, not without a good deal of awkwardness. “I… are you alright?”

“What?” asked Harry. He tore his eyes away from Sirius’s back, wondering if he’d misheard.

“You look like… well, you look terrible.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, turning around more fully to assess Remus. “And you’ve had dark circles under your eyes this whole week, and look like death warmed over,” he replied, wondering what the point was.

Remus winced.

“Right,” said Harry again. That had probably been excessively blunt, and… he didn’t need to tick off another Gryffindor. He definitely didn’t need to change James’ mind about holding back his friends, which meant it was best not to antagonize anyone. Even if unintentionally. “Look, I would really like to get some breakfast, if you don’t—”

“Moony,” called Pettigrew from down the hall. “You coming?”

Moony? Harry’d not really considered it before, but for a werewolf who didn’t want anyone knowing his condition, that was a terrible nickname… Then again, his given name was just as bad. Remus Lupin. Doubtful Remus knew that Harry had any idea of what he was, but he still turned bright red and hurried off.

Harry watched him go and looked past him down the hall to where the other three stood waiting—and quickly turned to duck into the kitchens, pulling the painting shut behind him. Maybe he just didn’t want to look weak in front of someone who already saw him as a target, but as he was now—after having slept on the stone floor of the Room of Requirements and barely at that—he couldn’t stand the thought of Sirius or James seeing him. When the painting was securely shut, however, and the distraction of the Marauders behind it, that left Harry to face his problems head-on. Or, it would have, only Hani was absent. With a group doing a deep-clean of the North Wing, apparently, according to the elf that spotted him and quickly summoned a full breakfast to his usual spot. It should have been a relief, for all he had fretted, but somehow, Harry couldn’t bring himself to do more than pick at his meal.

It wasn’t that any of the other elves were hostile towards him. No, it was almost the opposite, in fact; they all knew him well enough that they weren’t even overwhelmingly subservient when he visited. But from the beginning, he had sought out Hani’s presence as a grounding force. He had been afraid of what she would think, but he had also been counting on it—on the comfort of knowing someone cared enough to be worried, on her unique insights. Without her, he had no reason to linger. He ate what he could and left as quickly as he had come, though not before an elf (Hani’s friend Trumpet, Harry thought) tugged at his sleeve and pushed a cloth bundle into his hands, an apple balanced on top. As he took it, Trumpet frowned and snapped her fingers. Harry nearly dropped the food, startled as he was, but her magic felt similar to Hani’s, warm and gentle, and it wrapped around him only once, very quickly, and was gone again. It took him a moment to place what she’d done: a freshening charm for his robes.

Well. That was embarrassing.

Startled as he was, the elf didn’t give Harry a chance to respond to the gesture before ducking back
towards the stoves. Harry wondered, but not too much. He tucked the food into his bag and hurried out.

Once he was out, however, he didn’t know where to go. He badly needed a change of clothes and a shower, but he didn’t want to go back to the dorms, where there would be so many people waiting to ask questions… So he ducked into the toilet by the Transfiguration classroom, in a hallway deserted on weekends.

He looked awful, to say the least. No wonder Remus had stopped to ask—and that had been before Trumpet had charmed his robes, which would have shown the dust from the floor of the Room much more than his hair or skin did… and that was plenty. He set his glasses aside and ducked his head under the faucet, groping blindly for the right handle, gasping when the water came out icy and ran down the back of his neck. But he scrubbed his hands through his hair as long as he could bear before he stood up again, and by then he was used to the temperature enough that he didn’t bother with adding in hot water before splashing it on his face.

Of course, mostly that just smeared the grime around his face, but it got enough off for him to look somewhat presentable. More like he’d rolled out of bed and not bothered with a shower—or like he’d fallen asleep on his books, like Pandora was telling Hector and Flitwick. Granted, it was more a look for seventh and fifth years come June than a sixth year in January, but he was a Ravenclaw, and known, now, by most the school as having an extra-heavy workload.

And that, he supposed, was his ticket to normalcy. He needed to be somewhere somewhat visible, so those who didn’t know about it already wouldn’t realize anything was wrong, and the library was as good of a place as any to be alone in company. And if he was doing homework… well, it would be such a regular action, even Quora wouldn’t be able to find some fault to sink his claws into and exploit.

So he put his glasses back on and headed out while he had the conviction. It took him a while to reach it, avoiding the paths where the early-rising Ravenclaws and Gryffindors were heading to the Great Hall. Still, it was only eight when he reached the library, so the usual quiet was subdued into something like how he remembered his first summer here, when he had been all alone in the castle. Madame Pince wasn’t even in; he had felt her entering the Great Hall as he was leaving the kitchens. But there were a handful of students, and among them: Severus, already in position at their table. Harry ducked around a shelf the moment he saw them and, as he stood behind it, heart pounding, realized he had absolutely no interest in facing Severus. Not now. Not knowing that Severus wanted to serve the Dark Lord.

So Harry wandered through the stacks for several minutes before he found a promising table to work at. It was tucked away a far corner, half-hidden inside the joint of the bookshelves sticking out in front of its niche, so when he sat in it he was easily hidden from view no matter what direction anyone approached from. Of course, the intent of coming here had been that people would see him there, but… well, they would see him when he left. That would have to be enough, because the more he thought about it, the less willing he was to actually make small talk with anyone who might notice him and want to sit with him… let alone the deeper conversations Hector and Severus would ask for if he let them.

And, really, he was here to do homework, not socialize. But when he opened his bag, he thumbed through his books restlessly. His Charms work had a practical component, and while he had Transfiguration homework due Monday, he couldn’t bear to bring it out. He had his notes for Runes, but not the book, and the book for Potions, but not his notes. And—

He frowned, running his fingers over the thin book tucked into the back of his bag. It was the journal
the OMRL had sent him. His next hope in finding a way back where he belonged… Safe beyond Quora’s grip, where he wouldn’t have to pretend all the time...

He drew the journal slowly out of the bag, but he had barely set it on the table when he was overwhelmed with the openness of where he was sitting. Sure, it was tucked away into a back corner of the library that hardly anyone ever came to (unless, he imagined, they were searching for a place to snog, but he wasn’t going to think about that too hard), but the problem was that they could wander back there and find him. Quora could come find him. And while he might be able to pass off the journal as work for the OMRL, that would only beg the painfully normal question of why he wasn’t doing his homework.

The thought of Quora asking him that made Harry sick to his stomach.

Luckily, he did know a fair few wards. He’d not gotten a chance to really delve into his project for Flitwick yet, but he had created a functioning runic Notice-Me-Not, so he understood that spell inside and out. And he could imitate Severus’s Muffliato well enough, and they’d studied illusions enough that he could make the table appear empty, for anyone who happened to glance his way despite the other wards…

Excessive? Possibly. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that Quora was in the castle, and no level of warding would be too much when it came to Quora.

Once he had convinced himself not to cast any further wards, he turned back to the journal and brought out several pieces of parchment and a quill. He had yet to open it: Quora had cursed him immediately after the meeting with Dumbledore, and after… well, perhaps that had been a sign of what was to come. Perhaps he should have seen how little vicious Quora could be and prepared himself better for Saturday.

He tried not to dwell on it. Instead, he opened the cover, tracing his fingers over the annotation printed inside:

*Copy of JOURNAL VOLUME 4(?) BY ANANT ANAND, COVERING 23 MAY THRU 2 OCTOBER, 1935. Copy created for the sole purpose of TRANSLATION at the hands of HARRIGAN, DUDLEY on behalf of the Oxford Magical Research Library. Following completion or expiration of TRANSLATION, this copy os to be returned to the OMRL. No unauthorized reproductions may be made from this resource.*

The annotation had begun with a stamp, printed on the upper left corner of the cover, but the additions—his name, the title, ‘translation’—had been filled in by a charmed quill. The same quill, Harry thought, that had created the copy, line by line, duplicating the forms of the typed letters exactly. Harry had watched one of the quills at work one afternoon at the OMRL, mesmerized as much by the mechanized motions as by the deceptive complexity of the spell work that automated the process. One of the librarians had noticed and offered to point Harry to books explaining the making of the quill, something that apparently all librarians learned and practiced as part of their training, in order to keep the OMRL equipped with a ready supply, but despite his fascination, Harry had never found the time for it.

He was too busy translating and transcribing his own materials, though he had, at one point, had the thought that he might charm a quill to do the decoding work for him. Unfortunately, he’d not had the chance, because a quick scan of the first pages of the journal showed him that Anand was working in a standard two-letter shift Roman-to-rune transcription code. Harry was relieved to find he recognized it; some of the more involved codes took him days of work to crack, but he’d worked with this one often enough he wouldn’t even need to draw up a cipher to work by. If there were any additional parts to the code, they wouldn’t become apparent until he had worked through a good
section and analyzed for any errors or patterns in the writing, but he doubted there would be. It was a journal, after all, not a codex left for descendants intended to be trained in the work. As long as he focused rune to rune, letter to letter, he would be research-ready in no time. Or... several hours of mindless labor’s worth of time, but he was used to that, by now.

Mindless was best, in any case, when you had things to avoid thinking about. He dipped his quill in the inkwell and set to work.

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Harry stayed in the library for the whole day. It might have sounded like a commendable focus, but really he was clinging to the work with the same sort of desperation of a man running up a mountain, stumbling and struggling harder as the air got thinner. At one point—around lunch, he thought, or at least after he finally risked eating the apple—he paused to glance over his work and realized he had been so focused going letter-to-letter he’d translated three pages using the wrong cypher and had ended up with three pages of gibberish in the Roman alphabet instead of the runic.

It was nine o’clock when Harry realized that he had been staring into space for several minutes. Madame Pince would be making her final rounds soon, sending the handful of older students back to their dormitories. Harry didn’t think his wards would be enough to defeat Pince’s spite for students, and didn’t want to risk her coming over and discovering the apple core or the sandwich that was still in his bag.

Besides... he couldn’t just stay out a second night in a row. Pandora had told him she would talk to Flitwick, to keep him out of trouble for breaking curfew, and considering he hadn’t been hunted down and thrown in detention thus far, he’d say she succeeded.

Still, he dragged his feet as he made his way back to the tower, and made it back to the tower just as Lucas Boyle, the Head Boy and Quidditch captain, was coming out.

“Harrigan,” he said, holding the door open but not quite moving out of the way. “You gave us quite a fright, last night.”

“Huh?” Harry said with unsurpassable eloquence.

“I say us—Hector’s really the one who worried. It’s not exactly the best example I could have set as Head Boy, but I did tell him not to go ruining your fun. I figure everyone’s entitled to a bit of trouble, long as it doesn’t hurt anyone, and it was a Saturday night, anyways, and you’ve been as straight-laced as Ludo Bagman’s Quidditch boots. Anyways, no one else would go and rat on their roommate for getting out and living a little, right?”

Harry blinked. Did he think—um. “Right,” he said, unenthusiastically.

“But it’s Sunday now,” Lucas went on. “And if you didn’t get any sleep last night—you don’t look like you did—you’ve got some catching up to do. So you’d better be in bed by the time I get back from patrol, yeah?”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Harry said. The usual phrase, though he couldn’t muster the energy to give it any of the usual playful energy. Boyle seemed to take pity on him, at last, because he stood aside and let Harry pass.
The common room was quiet—a few of the seventh years playing some sort of table tennis with a wadded up bit of parchment and their wands, but nothing out of the ordinary. He turned and headed up the stairs that curved around the left side of the tower, leading to the boys' dormitories. The tower was fairly quiet, and the witchlight lamps had dimmed but there were still voices drifting out behind the doors, and some of them were still open.

The door to the fifth-years dormitory was one of them. Harry lingered on the landing outside of it, glancing in from the shadows, listening to the murmur of Hector's voice. He sat in the center of the room, in a circle with the four fifth years that moved as a unit: Barty Crouch Jr., Cooper Preston, Lenora Wesley, and Tash Stratton, all leaning over books and papers. On one of the beds sat the other fifth year, whose name Harry could never get right. Quinerius Quill? Quirius Quarrel? He was clearly listening, though he was pretending to read and not voicing any input to the conversation.

They were reviewing something for their OWLs, no doubt. Harry wasn't sure how Hector managed, or why he had taken responsibility for helping the fifth years stay on top of their OWL preparations when he was taking the maximum number of NEWT-level classes himself, but then again, he couldn't imagine Hector not taking that responsibility. He had been the one to pull Harry into the group revisions the previous year, after all, and though Sanchez had taken over, Hector had been the one to start it. Not that the whole group wasn't a major part in Harry's success, but it was Hector who always took initiative when he saw something or someone that could benefit in some way from his assistance.

Harry started up the final flight of stairs before he let out his sigh. Was it because of what had happened to Raj that Hector had become so willing to help? Had he been that way before, or had realizing that academic and social stress could drive someone to suicide been enough to motivate Hector to tackle everyone else's problems along with his own? More likely he felt responsible—not that he should, but Harry could somehow understand what it was like to feel responsible for someone else's death.

He deposited his bag and robe on the chair of his desk without bothering to brighten the lights in the room. It was all he could manage before sagging into his bed, where he kicked off his shoes and peeled off his socks with his toes. For a moment he just let his eyes close, his head sinking into the pillow, but even as tired as he was, the tower was too cold at night to be comfortable.

After a minute of letting the goosebumps crawl up his arms he maneuvered himself under the covers, curling into a tight ball, and after a minute he pulled off his glasses and stretched to put them on the side table. He'd left the door open just enough that a strip of dim light fell across the bed, and when he pulled his arm back close to himself, the tips his fingers rested in it. The sheets, though they were soft and smooth and had never bothered him before, seemed to scrape against his skin with every breath he took and... every shudder he couldn't hold back.

He didn't have the book to distract him anymore. He could get it out, but then when Hector came back Harry would have to face him, answer his questions, and he... Pandora was one thing, but Hector most definitely could never be allowed to find out what Quora had done. He would try to save Harry, and... While Harry believed that Hector would go on to do great things, being as brilliant and driven and good as he was, he would not be able to make a stand against Quora. He was already in enough danger as it was, with Quora interested enough in him to... ask Harry about him. Hector was intelligent. If anyone figured out what had happened to Harry...

He pulled his hand back, folding it into his chest and wrapping his fingers around his arm, digging the nails into his skin, trying to focus on that instead of the phantom pain lingering from the illusions, from the way his skin still ached like an irritated sunburn from the Cruciatus. The lingering feeling dug into his gut, like a light etched into his vision reminding him that it had happened, that someone
had actually dared torture a student with an unforgivable on Hogwarts’ grounds, that by all appearances neither Dumbledore nor any of the other professors knew what had happened. It was... it was. He had to accept it: It had happened. It was a reminder, yet, but it was proof, proof that regardless of the illusions it had been real. His fingers may or may not have been broken, he had no way of knowing, but he felt them break, and while he couldn't tell anyone, it had happened.

He closed his eyes, just resting for a moment, wondering if maybe he could sleep and this time it wouldn't be so bad, if his dreams could push the memories into the background, but the moment he did he was back in that office, his hand stretching himself out in front of him against Harry's will, and Quora’s boot came rushing down—he snapped his eyes open again, breathing heavily, curling even tighter into himself. He didn't want—he couldn't—

He struggled to take control of himself, to bury the image under his occlumency, but even after the time he had put in that morning, now that he was here, out of the room lying down and unguarded, his mind was more cluttered with thoughts and memories than it had been since he could fully remember. His eyes darted around the darkness, forcing himself to pay attention only to that reality.

Before he could truly settle, the beam of light widened, spilling off the edge of the bed, even as the glow on his fingertips was obstructed by the shadow of the person who had opened it. Had it not been for his magemetry, Harry might have jumped out of the bed, but he knew who it was.

“Harry?” Hector whispered through the dark. “Harry, are you—are you—?”

Harry shuddered at the sound of his friend’s voice. He wanted to bring the blanket up over his head, to cover his shaking body and hide from everything he’d done, but even the soft material of his oversized sleep shirt, which he had brought his knees up under to curl against his chest, felt scratchy.

He stayed still and silent. After a moment, Hector stepped in further, and Harry heard the door click shut behind him as they were plunged into total darkness. A moment later, he felt the burst of magic as Hector’s wand lit up the room with a lumos, just a hair brighter than the light had been before. Harry shifted slightly, now, turning his face into his pillow so that he did not close his eyes, curling up a bit tighter, hoping it would look like something he might do while he slept. If Hector suspected, he did not say anything.

The sounds of Hector slipping out of his robe and into his pajamas, as faint as they were, seemed to fill Harry’s ears, the edges of light he could still flickering. He listened to the soft, bare footsteps to their shared loo, and the door creaking ever-so-slightly as it shut, and felt the little burst of magic as the lights lit, streaming out from the crack under the door to fill the darkness the absent lumos had left. He listed to the rush of water from the sink as Hector splashed water on his face, then brushed his teeth, running through his usual nightly routine, and brushed his hair, no doubt, though Harry could not hear that. When he returned, he did not trouble with a lumos as he followed the familiar short steps to his bed. He set his wand on the bedside table, beside the photo of his parents, hiding the photo with Hector and Raj in the same frame.

And then Harry listened, for what felt like hours, until Hector’s breathing slowed to something steady. His magic shifted, following him into sleep, spreading itself out to cocoon his body. Harry listened, and when he was certain, he rolled over, letting his eyes find the dark shape of Hector’s bed in the barely-there light from the window, and he stared into it as though he could see, and he decided.

Non-involvement be damned, he was already in too deep to care. Pandora had been right, with all her talk of death and fighting. There was no way he would come out of this alive, so he might as well use what little power his position this close to Quora allowed him. If vague memories served, he had been the scapegoat, hero, and lamb before, all without choosing it; now he would choose his
own path, to protect others. To protect Hector, and Pandora, and Severus and Regulus, and hell, even Sirius Black from facing the fate he knew he was heading steadily towards.

Yes, lying awake in Ravenclaw tower, curled into himself and sweating cold beneath his sheets, afraid to sleep for the nightmares it would surely bring, Dudley Harrigan vowed to do whatever it took to protect the other students of Hogwarts from ever facing what he had to.

Chapter End Notes

Noa, you might say, sitting here on a Monday, of all days, a week after this chapter was supposed to be published. what on Earth...?

Well, sometimes life happens. Also, sometimes my perfectionist side gets the best of me. Not that this chapter is in any way perfect--in fact, it's probably very rough, since about 2000 words of it were preserved from the original draft, and the other... nearly 13,000 were written from scratch. One problem with ToTT's long chapters is that when I let the bug take hold, it takes a good long while to get back to work.

(...this is why the story was on hiatus for so long: I had to convince myself not to re-write everything. It might have been better for it; characters could have been revisited and developed more naturally, the pace of Harry’s study montage could have been about quadrupled, some more involved editing could have refined the actual writing... ah, don't tempt me!)

But this chapter, in particular, really needed some extra love. It's I think a very important chapter, because of between the previous chapter and the next Harry needs some time to process and make choices about his life, not being a completely passive player. If it seems rather rough around the edges, that's because it is, but this whole story is, so...

The main point, for me, is to get it done, and tell the story. And to not spend three weeks rewriting every chapter when I'm on a biweekly posting schedule. So here's to that!
Imperfect Transmutations

Chapter Notes

Well, the fun part about being late with last chapter's posting is that we get another in just one week instead of two. And it got Noa's patented 'speed cutting', where I go through and try to make a few snips here and there with the time that I have and somehow walk away from the experience with....... 400 extra words.

Harry woke with a gasp, the last vestiges of a nightmare as far from reach as the earliest light straining through the window, but the panic drumming against his chest. He clambered to grab his glasses from the end table, and snatched his wand from under his pillow, and sat straight up, looking around frantically for whatever might be lurking in the shadows—

Nothing.

Slowly Harry lowered his wand, his eyes darting about and placing him in Ravenclaw tower, the ambient magic luring him back towards calm. Hogwarts was still asleep, the students’ magic tranquil and the portraits and books and walls as steady as ever. He could feel it all, desperate as he was to find the source of his fear, but he found nothing unusual. Nothing out of place. Nothing dangerous, that he could tell.

Nothing.

Slowly Harry relaxed, leaning back into the headboard, breathing as evenly as he could manage. He searched out Hector in the dark, face pressed into a pillow, hair in a sleepy disarray. He watched the steady rise and fall of the covers, listened to the gentle brush of quilt against sheets.

Nothing unusual. No one else was even awake. No danger.

Nothing.

No one else, but Harry was wide awake now, and even if he had wanted to try sleep again, he wouldn’t have found it. He slipped from his bed, padding quietly across the room, and shut the door to the bathroom as gently as he could manage.

After a moment’s thought, he cast a silencing charm before turning to the sink. No need to worry Hector.

The water came out of the tap icy, which was exactly as Harry wanted it, splashing it on his face, trying to draw his mind from that strange place between dreaming and waking. But when he looked up and found himself staring back from the mirror, cheeks flushed, grime smudged across his face, he grimaced. He hadn’t taken a shower when he had gotten back to the dormitory—he hadn’t even changed his clothes. He was still wearing the same jeans and t-shirt he had worn under his robes when Quora—

Swallowing, Harry pulled the shirt off, fumbling his way to the showers. He didn’t even wait until he was completely out of his jeans before turning on the water. He needed to be clean. The clothes—they ought to be burned. Put behind him, like the rest of yesterday.
Ten long minutes of scrubbing, of nearly scalding water drilling sharp lines against his aching back, and Harry shut off the shower. He might have gone for hours, scraping every inch of himself with soap until the top layer of his skin had been washed way, but long showers were never a luxury when he was already on edge. Too long and he’d start to hear his aunt’s shrill voice yammering on, berating him for being wasteful through the door. He didn’t need that. Not today.

He wrapped one of the towels—Ravenclaw blue, soft and plush—around his waist and fished his wand and glasses from the pile of soggy clothes on the floor, wincing as he realized he’d let them get wet, shoving the glasses on his face and returning to the sink. The wand pulsed with magic as he rubbed it dry on the towel, gold sparks emerging from the end. “I know, I know,” he murmured. “Sorry…”

He hesitated before casting the charm to remove the uneven dusting of red hairs protruding from his chin, as the spell was known to leave knicks, almost like a real razor, when it was used imprecisely, but when he finally cast the magic ran almost delicately over his skin, and when Harry rubbed his jaw with the back of his hand, and it felt smooth as it ever had before the indecisive facial hair had decided to make its first tentative emergences into the world. The wand hummed pleasantly in his hand, and Harry stared at it for a moment.

He slowly turned and leveled his wand at the pile of soggy clothes on the tile by the showers. He hesitated again—he didn’t have that many clothes to spare, and those were… well, as decent as any that he owned—but the sight of them turned his mind to Quora again. Quora and everything that had happened, and that removed his hesitation.

“Incendio.”

Never mind that it was soaked, the clothing burst into a ball of blue flame, which burnt out so quickly Harry was left blinking and staring at the pile of ash left behind, and then at his wand again. There was something… different, about it. Like it was eager to jump to action, almost… excited. Harry couldn’t see what was so exciting, and to tell the truth, the fact that he was feeling this now, when he hadn’t felt so strong a connection with his wand since… well, since he had come here, at least, was somewhat alarming.

He set the wand on the edge of the sink, and turned back to the door. Now that he’d destroyed one set of clothes, he was stuck getting another, and hoping that he didn’t wake up Hector for any awkward conversations while dressed only in a towel, darting across the room to the closet—

But Hector didn’t stir, even as Harry took the time to choose his clothes. He didn’t stick around once he found them, though, and hurried back to the bathroom, closing the door as quietly as he could.

The clothes he’d collected weren’t the nicest of what he had left—the trousers had a hole in the knee that stubbornly re-appeared no matter how many times Hani sewed it shut, and she’d taken almost enough fabric out of the waist to make a second pair, had it been more serviceable—but they were the softest and most comfortable, and he couldn’t afford to be picky. Besides, under his robes, no one would know the difference. He would rather be comfortable than fashionable, and these at least were gentle enough to wear when…

He risked another look in the mirror before pulling the shirt down over his head. It didn’t look like anything was wrong. There weren’t so many freckles on his torso as his face and arms, only a light dusting, so he would have easily found anything out of place—he had a long scar down the ridge of his right shoulder blade from some incident with his Uncle he could only vaguely remember which stood out clearly enough, but what he felt wasn’t some old injury. It was the soreness of muscles overexerted, the tenderness of a hurt not healed. At the least, he should have bruises on his arms from straining against the chair, on his shoulder and back from the collisions against the floor. His fingers
should have been inflamed and bent. But looking at himself, it was as though nothing had even…

Harry dressed quickly, shoved his wand in the pocket of his jeans, and returned to the main room, leaving the thought behind to find a fresh robe and hide himself inside. His glasses got caught on the buttoned collar, and when he tried to get them unstuck they clattered on the floor—but Hector didn’t seem to notice. When he put them on again, Harry squinted through his glasses, watching his friend as well as he could in the faint light. There were a few lines between his eyebrows, as though he was concentrating on a particularly difficult transfiguration theory problem, but even as Harry watched they smoothed out again.

How he slept so deeply, still… but he was barely on the outskirts of a hidden war. His troubles were… different. They haunted him, surely, but to Hector, Hogwarts was still a safe haven. He cared about politics, passionately, but on the day to day, his worries were… about his roommate staying out late, about fifth years passing their OWLs, about getting Homework done…

Harry swallowed, turning away. Homework. It was Monday. He hadn’t done any of it. No matter how ridiculous it seemed, to be doing homework at a time like this, he couldn’t risk losing time to detention. He grabbed his bag, still hanging off his desk chair, and emptied it on his bed.

There wasn’t much inside. A few quills, his notes, and the journal he hadn’t made any real progress in translating. Frowning, he ran a hand over the cover… but glanced back towards Hector. Not now. He couldn’t—he had enough to worry about, things more pressing that his fool’s errand. He slid the journal into the top drawer of his desk and fumbled about for his books—Transfiguration, Potions, and Charms on Mondays. There was an open block the first two hours of the day; if he started now, he could get the homework done in time. After that, he could worry about time travel and… Quora. He slid the textbooks and appropriate notebooks into his bag and turned to head down to the kitchens.

He hesitated, though. Regarded the quilt-covered lump where Hector was still sleeping. For the briefest moment, Harry considered waking up his friend. Confessing everything. That he’d failed to keep his secrets. There wouldn’t be much he could say, not with that wretched contract he’d so stupidly signed, but—shouldn’t Hector know? Know that within days of Hector showing him that level of trust, Harry had betrayed it?

The moment passed.

Harry made his way out of the tower, pausing on the steps to check that no one else was up. It was early yet; the bells tolled recently, but the sconces were unlit until he walked by. Early enough that he felt no one out in the halls, though there were echoes—

When he felt them, he nearly puked.

He could feel Quora’s magic everywhere. He counted the stairs down to the kitchen, trying to distract himself and occlude all at once, but it was inescapable. Perhaps Quora had cast a _lumos_ here, on patrol some night before, and the memory had lingered. Or he had paused to freshen his robes, there at the entrance from the courtyard, or cast a warming charm on the way out, perhaps. It was no more than footprints in the sand at the very edge of a lake, and yet every step Harry took he found more and more. It was like a glaring light, so bright even closing his eyes did nothing to stop it shining through. And every brush made Harry jump, expecting the man himself to appear around the corner and finished what he had started—of course, he wouldn’t, not out here in the halls, but then Harry would have said not at Hogwarts at all, wouldn’t he have? It wasn’t worth thinking about, but
Harry couldn’t just ignore it, either, no more than he could ignore someone pricking him with a needle over and over again. And the smaller the traces, the more his magic stretched to find them, and the louder the rest of the magic grew—and no matter how much of Quora there was here, it was but dust in a sandstorm, here at Hogwarts. He didn’t have a vocabulary to profess this, this… dizzying kaleidoscope cacophony of micro-details.

So he counted the steps down to the kitchens, though he lost track somewhere before and got to a tentative fifty-three on the second leg and was still hyper-aware of the spot that at some point in time, four meters above him Quora had cast some sort of spell, just at the side-entrance to the Great Hall. And then going into the kitchens, that was, Harry thought, like changing a television off a quiet channel to find the next one broadcasting static blasting out the speakers. He stood in the doorway for a minute, not even bothering to escape it. And why should he? It was loud, but it wasn’t his magic, and it blocking his out, and if Harry let himself be overwhelmed then he wouldn’t think of—wouldn’t remember—

But Hani was there, this time, cooking alongside the rest of the elves. Harry was glad he’d showered; as soon as she’d spotted him she’d rushed forward, quick to ask if there was some problem, searching him up and down as though she might find some sign of trouble on his robes.

“No, I’m fine,” he said, laughing in a way that could only be called hollow, noticing, wondering at how simple it was to fake a smile when he was already lying through his teeth. “I’ve just woken up a bit early to get some of my extra work load done, you know all about that. And I wanted to see you, of course.”

Hani’s leathy skin flushed, and she eagerly led him to his usual seat, summoning a full meal through the air before Harry was even fully settled: tea steeping and a silver knife spreading clotted cream over brea still hot from the oven; eggs, sausages, and tomatoes sliding straight from a frying pan out onto a plate. She asked if he was wanting beans, too, but Harry shook his head, still with that smile. It was lovely. Too bad it smelled so… much. Too much for his stomach.

“Thank you, Hani,” he said, picking up the tea before it could get too strong. “I’m glad I can always count on you.”

“Professor Flitwick is saying yous be missing, yesterday morning,” Hani replied, tugging at her ears. “Hani is looking for Master Harry, but he is being hidden.”

What was the lie Pandora had given him? “I fell asleep revising, in a room I like to use because no one goes in there,” he said. “I might have overdone it a bit. But I got more than full night’s sleep back in the tower last night, don’t worry…”

He paused to sip the tea, burning the tip of his tongue on it. Hani crossed her thin arms over her chest. “Master Harry is needing to take care of himself.”

“Probably,” he agreed, looking into the tea. It smelled… pungent, though it was probably the same he had most days. He could see the liquid rippling, his hands shaking, and when he couldn’t get them to still set the cup aside. “Er, Hani? Not at the moment, since you just got me this and I need the caffeine, but—do you still have some of that tea? I mean, the one from last summer?”

Hani tilted her head, looking even more alarmed. “Master Harry is being… overwhelmed?”

“No at the moment,” he protested. Another lie. He didn’t care to have her try to help ground him, not now. “But it always helps me relax, and focus, doesn’t it? And I really do have a lot of work, and only until ten to—what time is it now?”
“Almost six,” the elf answered. “Hani is making some, but Master Harry is eating his breakfast before his homework. Not reading at the table. He is needing food before he tries to read, or he will be going nowhere.”

Six—that left him four hours. He wasn’t in the mood to argue with her, anyway, so he nodded and set about eating what he could, breaking the eggs open to soak up the yolk with the bread, blowing on the tomatoes until they didn’t burn his tongue when he chewed. And he let himself drift, focusing on the tastes and the smell of the tea in the steam wafting towards him from the mug, on the sounds of the pots and pans rattling and the knives chopping potatoes, on the firelight casting a warm glow over the room, the ham glistening and turning slowly on the great spit, drops of oil filling the room with a fragrant, sweet smell. He tried not to think about anything much, though his occlumency was too focused to stop idle thoughts from breaking through—he’d asked an elf once why they still cooked meat slowly on the spit, when with a snap of their fingers it could be perfectly done. You could taste the difference, the elf had claimed, and others had backed him up: magic was good for some things, but food was meant to nourish the body with nutrients, not magic. You could chop a potato with a slicing spell, but if you scorched it with a heating spell it would have the same flavor—or nourishment—as it would drizzled with oil and slow-roasted in an oven.

Too much. It was all too much, the food and the smells and the sounds and the way his hand was shaking so bad kept dropping half the food off his fork, but he kept eating until even Hani couldn’t complain, and then some more, until the plate was empty. He pushed it away before he could sick up, and pulled out his textbooks and spread them across his end of the table.

Transfiguration first—McGonagall liked to assign particularly tricky equations to solve on weekends. And it was safe, to dive into reading about some sort of crystal that didn’t seem to be following the usual laws of Transfiguration. Safe. As long as he didn’t think about how the actual magic would take place, there was no risk of stumbling into anything he didn’t want to think about—no thinking about how easily Quora had changed the arms of Harry’s chair into—no, safe, he read and he wrote rote answers to the questions without really thinking about them at all, and if his page was filled with uneven writing because his hand was still shaking and that caused the ink to flow out of the quill in unsteady bursts, well he wasn’t thinking about that, either. And when he ran out of problems to solve for Transfiguration, he jumped quickly into Potions before he could stop and let his mind catch up with him. It was work he could easily bury himself in, falling into familiar patterns—try doubling the valerian, and if it doesn’t explode, it will have created a more potent version—and forget that anything beyond it existed.

He finished his first mug of tea, unpleasant as it was, and barely noticed when Hani replaced it with the subtle herbal blend, but his hands had stopped shaking so violently when the painting opened and let two new people through. The intruding magic caught Harry’s attention before the opening portrait did, and he knew who it was without even looking up.

Sirius, because Harry had rotten luck, and… Remus. Joy.

Glancing up through his fringe, keeping his head tilted down and his quill hovering over his page, he realized the elves were cleaning up breakfast from the tables around him. The two Gryffindors must have missed it.

He wondered…

He let his head tilt back ever so slightly, so that the pair was fully contained within the boundaries of his glasses, and studied them carefully. Especially Remus, who had asked about Harry the day before, even when he looked terrible himself. It was strange. Remus was generally a mild-mannered, not particularly powerful person—but he did hang around the so-called ‘Marauders’, so maybe out of
the public eye he was as bad as they were. The wolf in sheep’s clothing, truly.

He looked weak enough now. Dark circles under his eyes, unshaved, spotty fuzz on his chin, and his pallor... he looked sick, even—Harry hadn’t realized the full extent of how bad it was, yesterday. Or maybe it was worse? Was it the full moon? Harry supposed he should be keeping track of that, for his own safety, but a werewolf was really the least of his concerns, something he might run into two nights a month at most, whereas—well, Dumbledore and all the staff knew there was a werewolf, apparently, and they seemed unconcerned. None of the students seemed to know, beyond the Gryffindor boys, so they must have had some way of securing him for the transformation...

They were speaking, and Harry could just hear them over the kitchen sounds:

"I told him not to bother them about it, but..."

"He's just as stubborn as you are, Sirius. More, sometimes, surprising as that is..."

"Well, what then? Should I have just let it slide? He was being rather—"

"You could have just let Lily handle it. I don't think it matters either way; the important part was that he stopped. So..."

"I don't—"

Sirius cut off abruptly, and Harry turned the page of his book without looking up any further. Hopefully his glasses prevented Sirius from knowing that Harry was watching him back, but—

No such luck. Sirius sneered, and took a step towards Harry. "Harridan," he spat. "What are you doing here?"

Harry slowly turned his face up. Sirius had his hand hovering beside the pocket of his robes, just waiting for an excuse to go for his wand, no doubt, but Harry couldn't really bring himself to be concerned. Sirius was just a kid. If he wanted to fight, well, maybe it would be good, release some stress against someone he stood a fair chance against. Only... the thought of actually fighting, especially here, in the House Elves' sanctuary, was distasteful. He rolled his eyes and looked back down at his work.

"He's always skulking about, like Snivellus," Sirius remarked loudly. To Remus, in theory, but clearly trying to goad Harry on. If he wanted to play that game... "Up to something, no doubt."

"He's just sitting there, Sirius. Come on, let's—"

"Why? So Harridan can—"

That was it. Harry clenched his jaw and looked up again. "That's not clever. The 'Harridan' thing. I mean. It wasn't clever the first time you said it, because insults only work if they're grounded in truth. It's just an uninspiring attempt to pick on me based on my last name, of all things. And every time you repeat it, it just proves that you are incapable of thinking of something better. Potter not helping you brainstorm a new one?" Harry paused, watching Sirius's scowl depen with some sick satisfaction. "As for why I'm here? Same as you, I'd imagine: to eat breakfast without being bothered by anyone."

Sirius took another step forward. "You think you're so smart, you—"

"Compared to you, sure," Harry said blandly. He raised his book up and leaned into it, watching out of his peripheral vision as Remus grabbed Sirius, preemptive to him coming any closer, and several
of the elves wiping down the tables began to turn and make eye contact with each other, speaking silently, and hoping that the age-old technique of 'ignore it and it will go away' would work. He didn't have the energy to deal with this... something this petty... It was disgusting.

"Sirius, come on. Let's just get something to eat and go—"

"You're just going to let him get away with this, Moony?"

"Get away with what? He's not doing anything. I want to go back to—"

"Not doing anything? Not doing anything? You know what he did Saturday night! You know what they said—"

Now Harry looked up sharply. If there was some rumor going around, he needed to nip it at the bud. Before it spread too far—before it reached Quora—

"And what exactly am I supposed to have done on Saturday night?" he demanded.

Sirius lunged forward, only to be held back by Remus's surprisingly firm grip. The elves were all paying attention now. "You know what you did, you—"

"Sirius, that was just a stupid rumor, and you know it," Remus snapped. He looked up at Harry. "I'm sorry, Harrigan, he's just—"

Harry cut him off. "What rumor?"

"THAT YOU—"

Remus clapped his hand over Sirius's mouth before he could get anything out. "It was generally assumed that you were out for an, um, romantic venture, and your roommate was trying to ruin your evening by turning you in. Except then the truth of the matter—that you fell asleep doing homework, that cleared it away. Sirius is the only one too hard-headed to get over it."

Sirius said something into Remus's hand that sounded suspiciously like 'Homework, my ass,' but it could have been anything, really.

"And why does he care either way?" Harry asked.

Remus flinched and hesitated, but seemed to decide that he might as well go all the way. "Well... he heard that it was a rumor from Crouch—you know, in your house? And since Barty is a friend of Regulus, he assumed..."

Harry opened his mouth, and shut it again only when he realized he must look like a fool with it hanging open like that. Him and Regulus...? Not that it would be the worst thing, only, Regulus was such a kid, and that was so far from the truth of the matter that...

"Even if it were true, I still don't see how it would be any of his business, all things considered," said Harry. "But it is not true, anyways, so I'd appreciate it if he didn't go around spreading something like that. I don't think Regulus would be particularly happy if he did."

Sirius managed to grab his wand out of his pocket and bat Remus's arm away in one swift motion, taking a step forward to point it at Harry threateningly. "You stay away from my brother, you hear!" he snarled. "You bloody bastard, I won't let you—"

Almost as quickly as he had drawn the wand he was surrounded by elves, pushing him and Remus
back toward the door. Hani was in the lead. "Young Masters is not supposed to be being in the kitchens," she said firmly. "They is leaving now!"

"Now hold on a second," Sirius said, stumbling backwards and jabbing his wand towards Harry again. "We've always—and he's—"

But the elves continued to press forward and Remus took the chance to back up and open the portrait hole. "Come on, Sirius," he said. "Let's just go."

"Go!" Sirius demanded. "But we—stop that, you little—"

Hani snapped her fingers, and suddenly Sirius shot backwards through the door, colliding with something outside with a loud 'thud'. The elves looked up at Remus, but he just held up his hands and hurried out after his friend.

The painting slammed shut behind him, the sound echoing through the room. Slowly the elves turned back towards Harry. He had stood, seeing Hani so close to Sirius's wand, and had his hand on his own, and slowly let go under their gazes.

"Thanks," he said clumsily. "And... I'm sorry. About all that."

Most of the elves nodded solemnly and turned to go back to their work, but as the mass broke apart he could hear them muttering among each other about Sirius's antics, several not even trying to be subtle about it.

"Young Masters is being terribly rude to Master Harry," Moggy said to Harry as he went past. "Moggy is knowing the Black elves; they is always worrying that Sirius Black is not wanting to be taught. He is leaving, and it is a terrible thing, but it is being a great burden off elves's shoulders, it is."

Harry sat down heavily. It was strange, to hear the elves so.... loose, with their gossip. Almost... flattering. By now they were just as used to his presence in the kitchens as he was theirs, of course, but this was...

He tried not to dwell on it, but he knew he'd come here for a reason. The same reason he'd come down to the kitchens on New Year's Eve. At the time, he'd hoped that if anyone came for him, they would at least attempt to defend him because he was a student and their charge. But this... this sense of belonging... security, even... it was something precious. Something he hadn't expected to find anywhere at Hogwarts since Quora had arrived.

"Master Harry?" said Hani quietly. He looked up and found her right in front of him. "Is Master Harry being... alright?"

"I will be," he said, and he thought maybe he could believe it. "I will be."

It was easier said than done, however. He had to run to get to the Transfiguration on time, after immersing himself so deeply in his charms homework he did not hear the bell and only Hani tugging mildly on his sleeve drew him back to reality. He thanked her profusely and sprinted out through the painting hole, through a cloud of residual magic where Sirius had apparently tried to hext the door open, through all those traces of where Quora had been and barely avoided running into Professor McGonagall on his way around the last corner.
She was unimpressed, but let Harry hurry in before her. Thank Merlin.

He was the last one to arrive, apparently, and cast around looking for a seat. The closest one open was next to Hector, but the way Hector perked up when he saw Harry mad Harry's stomach flip and gave him an itch in his feet, urging him to turn around and run back out again. He swallowed and looked around again before slipping into the last bench on the right side of the room. Severus, already sitting there, didn't hide his surprise, but shifted down a bit, either to give Harry more room or avoid the possibility of coming in contact with him. On Severus's other side, Evan Rosier glanced over, trying to figure out why he was being pressed for space, but when he saw Harry his face seemed to smooth over, and he gave Harry a small nod before turning his gaze up to the front.

"Our topic for this lecture," McGonagall began, sweeping down the aisle past Harry. "Is, as you all know, having done the homework, the alchemical properties of the crystals Bauer grew for his experiment."

What followed was a lecture on type of crystal which were supposed to be crystallized magic. That was ridiculous, which was apparent to Harry more readily than others, perhaps, because magic was not a physical thing that could crystallized, but, well, a hack's intention for a discovery did not prevent it from being otherwise useful. In this case, the magic inside the crystals was said to be able to permanently alter the atomic structure of the rest of the crystal, whereas in traditional alchemy it was the caster's magic which was consumed. Probably fascinating to people who cared about alchemy, but for Harry...

He found it perplexing, in the gentlest terms, disturbing more accurately, observing the array of crystals McGonagall had spread on the table at the front of the room. He supposed if he'd been raised in the magical world, he would have found it similar to encountering a muggle photograph. The magic was so still that, even though he knew it was there, just in a different state, it felt... dead, almost. Mostly when objects were drenched in magic, it flowed through them, circulating, carrying out its task, but in the crystal, it was as though time had stopped entirely.

Wasn't that a thought? Harry pushed it to the back of his mind to examine later. He didn't need to stop time, but if stilling magic was like stopping time, then perhaps the reversal of magic...

In any case, no one else seemed particularly bothered by the crystals, nor particularly interested, on a Monday morning, even when McGonagall waved her wand to distribute them out among the desks. The cluster that landed in front of Severus was a pale blue—Rosier poked it with one finger, but then McGonagall turned to the blackboard, and everyone scrambled for a way to take notes. Alchemy was the sort of subject that if you lost track of the technical explanations for even a minute, you would be completely lost.

Though McGonagall could rattle happily on in complex theoretical terms and equations for hours, she was luckily loathe to give any lesson without a practical component. Soon enough, she conducted them to experiment with the crystals, first using a shattering charm to divide them into several smaller pieces and then aiming to recreate a true transmutation. Severus performed the spell, and Harry picked up one of the points about the size of his thumb to roll about his palm, but neither made a move to say anything.

Finally, Rosier broke the silence. "I suppose we'll have to use Nasir's Principle?" he said skeptically, poking one of the chunks he'd taken with his wand. "Only, I think that concept is usually just used for focussing tools, not objects with the focus directly..."

"Wouldn't it work to just underpower the spell?" Harry suggested. "I mean, to transfigure it as you normally would, but with strong intent and weak magic. If there's as much magic in it as the book says, it would complete the transfiguration by using what magic was there—I mean, it's own, I
"Well, that might... Even if it does work, wouldn't it just be a transfiguration? We're going for transmutation."

"But I mean—transfiguration is where the subject is being changed by the actor, by an outside source of magic, and the actor sustaining the spell—so, if the source of magic is internal..."

"Well, that's a poor definition, isn't it? Self-transfiguration is still transfiguration," Rosier argued. Though he seemed to be a rather tactile person, with how his first instinct was to poke and prod at the crystal, he argued with a focused intensity rather than a passion, eyes narrowed but voice dull. "That's for one. And also, all you're saying is that it wouldn't be, ah, classic transfiguration, not that it would necessarily be transmutation. In your idea, the magic would still be holding up the change, and once it was exhausted, it would go back to as it is now. So it wouldn't actually be a transmutation."

"Except," Harry countered, "that it is essentially crystallized magic, right? So if magic is expended, there will be no way for it to return to it's original form. Since the magic was the defining part of what it is. Without it... what's to say it would go back to being a crystal?"

Severus, who had been letting them argue over him, jabbed his wand towards one of the smallest pieces of the crystal that had broken it off, and changed it quite easily into an ordinary stone, effectively ending the discussion. Both Harry and Rosier stared at it blankly, though it was unlikely that Rosier was 'seeing' what Harry was. It was as he'd guessed: when Severus underpowered the spell, the crystal's own magic was drawn into action. But it felt no different from any other transfigured object, at this point...

"So now we... wait?" Rosier asked.

Severus rolled his eyes, and jabbed his wand again. "Finite incantatem."

They all watched carefully as the stone sat there, unmoving—but then it began to change, and they all let out a disappointed breath. To say it changed back wouldn't be quite accurate: it remained the stone's smooth shape, and while it became translucent again, the blue color was gone.

"Well," said Rosier doubtfully. "Something did change, I suppose."

But Harry could tell more accurately what that 'something' was. "Yeah, it lost the magic. That's where the color comes from, I'd say."

"But the shape is ostensibly permanent. And wasn't it supposed to just be magic? How can crystallized magic not have magic?"

"There's several spells that can permanently change a material's shape and color," Severus cut in. "It's not transmutation. You suggested Nasir's Principle?"

Rosier flipped his textbook open, searching for the page. Severus picked up the smooth crystal and held it to the light, but put it down without saying anything.

"Here's the passage," Rosier said, flattening the pages with his palm. "Page one seventy five... oh, Circe, I failed these calculations on the test. Sev, you passed... you look at it...."

On they went, until the bell rang. Somehow, despite the fact that Harry and Severus never said a direct word to one another, they managed to make some progress, thanks to Rosier. He was surprisingly easy to work with. He didn't seem particularly gifted with transfiguration, but he was
intelligent enough, and at least willing to lead the conversation. They managed several trials, mostly in vain. One they thought actually managed a permanent transmutation, but it wasn't into the lump of iron they'd intended to make, but rather a strange, acidic black substance that looked like tar. McGonagall had swooped in to vanish it before it ate a hole in the desk, so they weren't certain that it was permanent, in any case. At least they, unlike the Gryffindors, didn't blow anything up. James' hair was in a particularly intense state of disarray, and he looked frustrated, probably since he was usually ahead of everyone else in Transfiguration.

At the end of the hour, McGonagall directed them to take the extra crystals and investigate them on their own, writing an analysis by Thursday—and when she said 'analysis', she meant fully cited essay. Harry wondered where he would find the time... but somehow, he would make it work.

He gathered his things quickly, intent on disappearing back into the kitchen until Potions, but Rosier came around the bench to stop him. "Why don't you come eat at our table, Harrigan?" he offered. "I know you're friends with Sev and Regulus, and you're in that study group with Lucinda and Michael, aren't you? Why not give the rest of us a try?"

Harry was caught off guard. Eat with the Slytherins? He'd never... and why was Rosier, of all people, asking him? If it had been Regulus, it would make sense, but Rosier...

But over Rosier's shoulder, he could see Pandora urging Hector along, while Hector was gesturing over to him. Did he want to... it would be so easy to run and catch up and pretend like things were normal...

But they weren't. He'd talk to Hector eventually, just... not yet. He wasn't ready. He needed a distraction.

"Alright," he said. Rosier gave him a polite smile, which Harry did his best to return. "Can't hurt to mix things up, I guess."

"Of course."

Severus didn't say anything.

Rosier led the way down to the Great Hall, and continued to carry the conversation they'd been having before McGonagall had cut them off. Harry was only halfway engaging, though it was more than Severus was. He looked like he was contemplating disappearing around a corner and off to the library. He must like Rosier a good deal, to go along with this. Even when they had Potions last Wednesday and had been partnered as they always were, he had treated Harry to a stony silence, and he hadn't turned up at their usual table in the Library since their argument began. Harry wasn't looking to push him on the matter—he had enough to deal with, so if Severus wanted to be angry with him, then so be it. He didn't doubt that Severus could hold a grudge. Besides... it was probably safer like this. If Quora saw that they were close and wanted information...

But he pushed that thought aside, and laughed at something Rosier said, and for once was grateful for all the students around him rushing towards lunch, because they covered up the traces that had dogged him that morning. Rosier chose their seats at Slytherin table, him sitting with Severus on his left and Harry on his right, this time.

The seats across from them were empty, but not for long. Of course it had to be the most distasteful of the Slytherins that sat down next. Avery and Mulciber, though they were seventh years, took one look their way and snatched up the seats across from Severus and Rosier. Harry had avoided them studiously since Halloween, but now that he was in their territory...
"Oh, please, take a seat," Rosier drawled as they sat down. "We couldn't possibly be saving those for anyone."

"Look what the cat dragged in, Seth," said Avery. "Prince Rosy brought not one, but two half-bloods to the table. What tricks will he have them doing next?"

"It seems to be in fashion to dine with beasts, Reed," Mulciber replied. He didn't seem particularly troubled, grabbing a thick leg of turkey from the platter between him and Rosier, but the way he said it—like he couldn't imagine anyone taking issue with his words—made Harry's stomach turn. What an ass.

"Avery, Mulciber," Rosier said blandly. "Don't you have children to harass? No need to appall our guest with your terrible table manners."

"No worries, Rosy. We've made time just for you. An' Sev doesn't mind, does he, Sev?" Mulciber said with a grin. He was talking and chewing at the same time. Harry at least hoped he was just doing it for show.

"Even I have better etiquette than you, when the company requires it," Severus replied, just as plainly as Rosier had. Curious. Last time Harry had been close enough to hear them talk, he had been less hostile. "And I was raised among piss-poor working-class muggles, so I would have an excuse if I were as disgusting as you are. And yet."

Avery rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well. The company doesn't exactly require it."

"It was your choice to sit there," Rosier pointed out, but neither boy seem inclined to leave. Rosier sighed. "Apologies, Harrigan. I suppose there are worse people you could dine with, though you won't find them at Slytherin table."

"Prince Rosy likes to pretend he's all class," Mulciber told Harry. "Even though he has no taste."

"And you do?" Harry couldn't help but ask.

"Cyril!" Rosier fortunately called over the question, waving at someone going past. "Please. Sit with us. I beg of you. Seth is lowering the intelligence of the whole table."

Cyril—Harry only had a few classes with him, and couldn't remember his last name—shrugged and sat down next to Mulciber, across from Harry. He was unremarkable in appearance: mousy brown hair and dull blueish-grey eyes, fair skin with a smattering of acne, a slightly upturned nose. His magic seemed dull as well, moving about sleepily. But he did look at Harry with curiosity, and spoke readily enough.

"You're the new professor's assistant," he said. "Quora's."

"Er, yeah," Harry said, hastily swallowing a half-chewed piece of broccoli. Cyril wasn't in Defense, so it was something of a surprise that he knew that.

"I've heard Quora's a traditionalist." Cyril's eyes flicked down to Harry's chest. What did he expect to find there, a prefect's badge? Harry was in uniform, same as anyone else. "What was your family name again? Harrison?"

"It's Harrigan," Rosier cut in impatiently, but not before Harry could feel the back of his neck burning. Not that he cared about something stupid like the old family lines, but it was clear that Cyril was judging him for it. "And he's been top of class since last year. Not that you'd know. Cyril failed his Defense OWL," Rosier told Harry.
"I didn't fail," Cyril said, turning his attention towards moving a slice of turkey to his plate. "I simply did not and do not see the point of wasting time revising for Defense Against the Dark Arts, if you understand my meaning."

"Not that you’re any better at the actual Dark Arts,” Mulciber snorted. Cyril’s face twisted. "At least I passed, even without revising. You actually did fail."

“Well if you’re going to make a political statement, you should do it properly.” Mulciber grinned again. His teeth were particularly uneven, seeming halfway to forming two rows instead of one. Harry couldn’t help but notice, as there was a chunk of turkey caught in them.

“You’re both fools, pretending doing poorly in school does anything politically except remove your chances of participating down the line,” Rosier said. “You agree with me, don’t you Harrigan?”

“Of course he agrees with you,” Avery sneered. “He’s that Quora’s bitch.”

Rosier’s hand tightened on his fork, and Avery let out a yelp a moment later and glared at Severus, who kept eating. Shin kicking? Really? Harry chose not to dignify it with a response.

“I don’t know about politics,” he said instead. “It’s more a matter of practicality.”

“Are you planning on defending yourself against the Dark Arts anytime soon?” Mulciber asked, sizing him up.

“If someone is stupid enough to try it, yes,” Harry replied, glaring right back. Mulciber didn’t terrify him. Maybe Dumbledore would punish him for fighting back, but frankly, there wasn’t any punishment any of the Professors but one would give that would really bother him.

“There’s a match I’d like to see,” Rosier said thoughtfully. “You’ve got the full arsenal, Seth, but Harry is fast.”

“I can do more than dodge, you know.”

“Yes, well, until you demonstrate it, that’s all anyone’s going to know you’re capable of,” Rosier replied. “But go on, explain what you mean.”

Harry swallowed, glancing over at Rosier, who seemed perfectly calm. Even he knew enough strategy not to tell potential enemies the extent of his abilities, and what did he want, really? “...Demonstrations are better than lists, and I’m not looking for a fight.”

“I meant by—how did you put it? A matter of practicality.”

“Oh.” Well, that was easier. He picked up his goblet of pumpkin juice and swirled it around, staring into the cup. “Well, say that you have a curse or a tactic you want to try out. If you have a good opponent—someone who is trained in Defense—then they’re going to know how to defend themselves against you. But if you also know how they’re going to defend themselves, then you can figure out how to get around that defense. If they’re better than you, they’re going to have an alternative defense on hand, but if you’re better than them, you’ve got something around that, too. And so on.”

“Practical,” Rosier agreed.

“It’s the theory behind dueling—in the sport’s sense, I mean, but it applies here too,” Harry explained. “I read about it for a Charms project. Besides, who’s to say that the person you’re up
against doesn’t have a grasp of the Dark Arts as well? Or that they’re even a person—what if your opponent is a nundu? Defense is where dangerous creatures are studied as well. And—well, if you really cared about the Dark Arts, you’d recognize that regardless of the language used to describe them, most of what we cover in class is essentially the same as you would cover in a Dark Arts class, only the practical stuff is different—and the practical stuff for Dark Arts is what I assume you’re already finding ways to learn outside of school. So if you’d stuck with Defense, you’d have twice as much magic at your command from everyone else.”

“So what I got from that is that you’re a Ravenclaw,” Cyril drawled. He did look less offended by Harry’s presence, though, and even Mulciber had shut up and listened to the whole rant. Harry wasn’t sure that either of those reactions was really a good thing, now that he considered it. Was he really sitting here discussing the Dark Arts? Encouraging people to care about—

His class?

“He’s right,” Rosier agreed. “Know your enemy. And if you’re incapable of casting the most basic defensive magic, how can you think you’re worthy of the Dark Arts?”

That… really wasn’t what Harry had meant. He stabbed a bit of broccoli instead of contradicting Rosier, though. Of the Slytherins gathered, Severus was the only one he even halfway cared to be candid with about his opinions on that sort of thing. It was probably for the best that they thought that’s what he meant, anyways… one less thing to worry about.

“As expected, I suppose,” Mulciber said, leaning forward to prop his chin on his hand. “You did attend the Hallow’s Eve rally, and received a letter from—”

“Mulciber,” said Rosier sharply, but not before Harry’s heart could give a flutter remembering the eagle and the clear threat. It felt like a lifetime ago, though it had only been a few months.

“I’m just saying. Harrigan hasn’t exactly hidden his darker inclinations, has he?”

*His* what?

“This is hardly the place to discuss that,” Rosier said. “And I really didn’t invite Harrigan to sit with us to be harassed by you lot.”

“You were the one to start this, and he doesn’t mind us, anyways.” Mulciber took a lazy bite of turkey, not moving his chin from his hand, and only halfway chewed it before explaining that assertion. Harry could feel Rosier growing more and more tense beside him. Probably Mulciber was enjoying winding him up. “He can’t; he puts up with Severus, doesn’t he? Anyone who can stand Sev… he’s got a tongue that could flay a corpse at thirty paces, and he doesn’t hold back.”

“Distance has nothing to do with it,” Severus said. He still sounded rather cool. “A letter will do the trick, if you know how to think before you use your words. You should try it sometime. Thinking, that is. It will be a novel experience for everyone to see you try.”

Avery scoffed, coming to Mulciber’s aid. “You sixth years all think you’re so high and mighty. Here’s Prince Rosy and a mudblood who pretends he isn’t—and what about you, Harrigan? Think it’s something special, sucking up to the professor? Or should I say— ow!”

This time, it was not shin-kicking but a stinging hex thrown under the table to cut off Avery from whatever lewd comment he was going to make. Harry didn’t want to think about it—didn’t want to think about the professor at all, really. He took another bite of broccoli.

“If you can’t restrain yourself from making disgusting comments, I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” said Rosier. For whatever reason, though it was Avery who had been talking, it was
Mulciber he was speaking to. “Perhaps you should take up with the Gryffindors, if you cannot handle yourself in civilized company.”

Rosier still didn’t seem particularly imposing to Harry, but he did not so much as blink as he stared Mulciber down. Apparently Harry had been inserted into what must be the top power struggle in Slytherin, with Mulciber being a seventh year but Rosier commanding respect. Cyril’s eyes darted back and forth between the two, mouth hanging slightly open and his spoon dripping pea soup back into his bowl, so intent that he did not notice his surroundings shifting until Lucinda Talkalot came and clapped him on the shoulder, intent on using him to balance as she climbed over the bench. Cyril started, and the spoon slipped from his hand. He caught it, but only just, and in a hasty moment that connected his elbow with the bowl and sent soup flying onto everyone, the bowl landing upside-down on Avery’s plate.

It was, at least, a good way to break the tension. A few spells late and a half-hearted stern word from Professor Slughorn and everyone was free of soup. Lucinda looked like she was regretting her choice in seat, but she was giving Harry a hungry look as well, and didn’t move.

“Harrigan,” she began cheerfully, but Harry didn’t catch the rest of what she said.

The cleaning spells had been distracting, and there were so many people around he wasn’t reaching much further than the Great Hall, but—Harry had always been drawn to his magic. He could feel his presence from the moment he opened the side door up by the teachers’ table, didn’t have to look to be intensely aware of his progress across to where he settled in between Professor Notaro and Slughorn, and—God, he wanted nothing more than to jump up and run from the room. But that would surely draw attention, and as long as he didn’t look, he could pretend Quora hadn’t seen him. He didn’t need to look—he could feel his magic, turning around wouldn’t help, it wasn’t putting his back to him if he was fully aware of the important thing, which was his magic… His magic… And everyone was just going on eating, and talking, and no one even noticed Quora come in. He could even hear a group burst into laughter from behind him, and it sounded so—so wrong, when he was up there. But who would care? None of them knew he was a psychopath—a violent, prejudiced, manipulative, and—and—torturing psychopath. They were just kids. Kids he was collecting information on, scouting to see who would be useful. Some who he’d already recruited… it wasn’t just Harry pathetically giving up information.

It was probably one of the people he was sitting with now, he realized with a horrible jolt. Mulciber, Avery, Rosier, and Severus had all been on the list of Death Eaters he’d left himself, and Cyril had made his views on the Dark Arts clear—not a perfect indication, but as good as it got. And Lucinda was in the revisions group, which Quora had known about, so it could have been her—she could have been the one who gave that information. He studied her—she’d never seemed particularly malicious to him. There were multiple muggleborns in the group, and she’d never voiced any problem with them. But if she were the spy… a good spy wouldn’t show any sign…

“Harrigan?”

Harry blinked. Lucinda was looking at him, eyebrows raised. He realized he was staring.

Occlumency, Harry, that voice in his head reminded him, and he tried to focus.

“Sorry. I was thinking about—the transfiguration homework,” he blundered, latching on the first idea that came to mind. “Completely missed what you said—sorry.”

“Ravenclaw,” Cyril remarked, as though it were some monumental observation. Well, fat chance of him being the spy, with a mind like that…
Mulgiber added something, probably crass, which made Lucinda roll her eyes, but Rosier talked right over him. “You thought of something?” he asked eagerly. “Merlin, Harrigan; tell us. We tried absolutely *everything* in class.”

“Er,” said Harry, startled and somewhat alarmed with how bright-eyed Rosier had become. Even Rosier, with his attempts to control the table, was sitting here with the rest of them, just a student, just a kid, really; they were all just kids. Harry didn’t think he’d seen Rosier at the Hallow’s Eve gathering, either—he wished he hadn’t gone, because none of this would have happened… he would have just been another Ravenclaw, ignorant of Quora’s true identity, like he was supposed to be…

“Oh, come on,” Rosier said. “You want to trade? I’ll do your Charms.”

“Oh, no, that’s…” Harry looked around the table, searching for something plausible to say. Transfiguration, right—they’d been working with the crystals; crystallized magic, the book had said, but… “Salt,” he blurted out, spotting the little bronze shaker.

“What?”

“I mean—the material,” he amended quickly. “Salt forms crystals.”

Lucinda looked down at the salt, and back up to Harry. He flushed.

“Salt, quartz, um, you know—physical things form crystals. I mean, there’s got to be some element used to give the magic something to hold on to. Magic doesn’t just become solid once you force it to be still, right? So it’s gotta be bound to something that forms crystals on its own. Professor McGonagall told us to analyze it, so we, uh, run the, um… you know, the tests we use for identifying potions? There’s got to be similar ones for identifying elements. Compounds. That sort of thing.”

“You’re saying Bauer was a hack,” Lucinda surmised.

“What?”

“If it’s not crystallized magic, as he claimed…”

“Oh, no. Well, yes— I mean, it’s probably not just magic. There *is* magic, but it’s bound to the compound, and—”

Severus cut in. “If we determine the compound it is bound to, we can follow the transmutation table to determine what other compounds it can be rearranged into—on the atomic level. Never adding any additional elements, only using what’s already there to form something new…” He paused, staring into space. “Activating the magic would be the catalyst, but it wouldn’t actually require any to sustain the change. True transmutation. The—”

He cut off abruptly, and Harry swallowed, trying to focus on this accidentally plausible solution, trying to keep his head—maybe he could claim to want to go do the homework now, get away from here, from him— maybe he could convince Severus to come with him, away—

“True transmutation, the muggle way,” Lucinda finished for him. On Harry’s left, he felt Rosier stiffen with surprise, and Cyril looked puzzled, but she ignored them. “Well, if your method works, you’ve just saved all of us a good deal of time.” She paused. “How _do_ you find the time to assist Professor Quora, on top of your classwork, Harry? I heard you’re helping with some of his actual classes, which must fill all of your free periods.”
Harry did an admirable job not wincing, but his thoughts stuttered to a halt—tomorrow. He’d have to face—face him, in that classroom, tomorrow. He’d have to—

“Not all of them,” he told her. “I’m only taking six classes, so… you’re doing eight, right? And captaining Quidditch? Can’t imagine that.”

She tilted her head to the side, one of her two black braids slipping off her shoulder. “Playing Quidditch is hardly comparable to working,” she said. “So… what do you do?”

“What?”

“You’re his assistant. What do you ‘assist’ with?”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Um… grading homework from the younger students, and answering their questions at office hours. Help monitor practicals. That sort of thing, nothing really interesting.”

He really didn’t want to talk about Quora. Or the long Saturdays—especially not—

“Regulus mentioned you were a proctor for a mock exam,” Rosier said.

“Yeah, I… yeah.”

“I bet there will be all sorts of chances there,” Avery said, drawing everyone’s attention. “You know… he might leave you alone in his office… you’ll have all kinds of access—I bet you could sell test questions a sickle apiece, at least in your house.”

Harry had tuned out around the mention of the office. Alone or no, the thought of going back there… he rubbed his wrists under the table…

“He’d probably have Harrigan’s head if he tried something like that,” Rosier said. He didn’t know the first of it. “He doesn’t seem like the forgiving type.”

Mucliber sniffed. “Wasn’t he just some old guy?”

“He’s up there now,” said Avery, jerking his chin towards the staff table.

“Doesn’t look like much,” Mulciber said skeptically, openly eyeing the man. Harry wished Mulciber had a sense of subtlety… not to pull his attention this way… “I’ve heard he’s better than that Burke was, but I don’t believe a word of it. The Burkes are experts… everyone knows that store they’ve got in Knockturne is a treasure trove of proper dark artefacts, even if it looks like a dump…”

“The Burkes may be an old line, but Professor Burke was as paranoid as they come,” Rosier said. “I don’t know why he thought he’d try hiding right under Dumbledore’s nose… where did Slughorn say he’d run off to, Severus? Germany?”

If Severus responded, it was non-verbal. Harry was too busy trying to keep calm to look.

“Still,” Mulciber said. “At least he had some credibility. This Quora—that’s not a name with the quality of a Burke.”

“Names can only do so much,” Rosier replied. “Look at Crabbe.”

The Slytherins all followed his gaze down the table, and Harry forced himself to turn with them. He wasn’t sure who ‘Crabbe’ was, but now that he was turned he couldn’t resist looking up—

And there he was. The same robes Harry had first seen him at Hogwarts in again, chatting amicably...
with Slughorn, completely at ease—Dumbledore’s seat, a few further down the line, empty—

Was he looking up? Harry twisted back forward again, as quickly as he could, heart pounding in his chest. He realized he’d grabbed his wand, and couldn’t stand to let go, not when— *God*, he wanted out of here, somewhere—safe—

“I see what you mean,” said Cyril. “But his brother is acceptable, and his sister… well, she’s engaged to Bulstrode, so that’s something.”

“His sister was one of the best beaters our quidditch team has ever known,” Lucinda said sharply. “Don’t you reduce her to an engagement.”

“And of the three Crabbes, she’d have the best chance at being able to teach,” Rosier agreed. “Not that it’s much competition, there. Anyways, Quora is a decent professor. Doesn’t waste time… proselytizing with anti-dark propaganda.”

“He wouldn’t,” Cyril said. He actually looked thoughtful. “Quora—Timothy Quora, right? He’s a well-known pureblood tutor. You’ve probably got cousins who’ve been taught by him.”

“Not us,” said Avery. “My family’s been at Hogwarts for generations. Slytherin all the way.”

“And Merlin knows an Avery wouldn’t lift a book outside of school,” Rosier drawled, but like Cyril, he seemed to be regarding Quora in a speculative light. Harry wished he wouldn’t. Rosier seemed almost decent, even knowing he was going to become a Death Eater, and Harry would rather spare him Quora’s attention. “Perhaps one of *my* cousins. I’ll have to write… a connection to the professor wouldn’t go amiss…”

“Who needs a cousin?” Mulciber asked. “You’ve got Harrigan here. Reed’s right, he probably has access to all sorts of confidential materials… the exams, homework, the gradebook… Is that why you agreed to it, Harrigan, to doing something as obviously pandering as working as a teacher’s assistant? Even if you are a Ravenclaw, you seem to have *some* sense of identifying opportunity when it presents itself to you on one of Malfoy’s gilded plates—or was that only the once? Shame that you invited to join in for the New Year… it would have been entertaining one way or another —”

“Mulciber,” said Severus suddenly, sharply, cutting him off. “Shut up.”

Silence. Mulciber stared at Severus, mouth still open, Avery’s eyes bugging out, Rosier slowly letting his hand fall to his wand. The power play Harry had seen before—where did Severus fit into it? Avery and Mulciber had sat down at the table pointing out Severus’s blood, and while Severus might be accepted among them, to speak up like that… to spare Harry the embarrassment…

Harry brought his left hand up from under the table to grab his goblet of pumpkin juice. Everyone’s eyes jumped to him at the motion, but he didn’t do anything but take a drink. *Pretend like nothing’s wrong, and maybe the problem will go away* —it hadn’t worked for him yet, but he didn’t have anything else to try. He just wanted them to—Quora was in the fucking room, and they were raising a fuss? Didn’t they have any sense of danger?

And after a moment, Mulciber relaxed into a shrug. “It’s a reasonable question. About why he’s working for that Quora bloke, I mean.”

“Because I was asked to,” Harry said flatly, doing his best not to puke at the aftertaste of pumpkin juice, far too strong for him to deal with. He was still focused mostly on Quora—he didn’t think he could not be, even if he for some reason were deluded into thinking it was a smart idea, even if there
was no sign the man was paying attention to them... he was still there, and... and Mulciber, of all people, had not meant anything pleasant, bringing up the New Year’s party Harry had so desperately avoided. He...

He meant that Harry would have been the entertainment, had he shown up. Having seen what Quora could... he hadn't—Harry hoped Quora wasn't trying to entertain anyone, on Saturday. If he was... No, he hadn't; he'd had a goal, and Harry had—

If Harry had been the entertainment at New Year’s, he could only imagine what Quora would have done to him.

He'd rather not. He tried to shake the thought. Mulciber was just trying to get a rise out of him—he was nothing but a bully and a sadistic pig, and Harry was better than that. He put on his coolest look before he went on. "And it pays, and gives me references for my CV, down the line. And because Slughorn thought to recommend me. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"Not particularly," Mulciber drawled, meeting Harry's level gaze. But he left it at.

Avery spoke next, but whatever he said—Quora was using magic, it was flaring up, he had his wand, he—

Summoning something. A dish, probably. Occlumency, Harry. He steadied his breathing—no one had noticed; Mulciber was sneering at whatever Avery had said, and Lucinda rolling her eyes, and Rosier glaring—something petty, no doubt. Harry couldn't bring himself to care—

"But you have to get something else out of it," Cyril said. "I mean, access to the Defense professor... surely you've at least got some advance notice on exams, quizzes, the like, and—"

"Pardon the interruption, but might I speak with you, Harrigan?"

Harry practically leapt out of his seat, not even bothering to hide the relief at Regulus's sudden approach. "Of course," he said, perhaps too eagerly, not bothering to allow Cyril to finish his theorizing. "I've just finished."

"Oh," said Regulus, raising an eyebrow as Harry snatched his bag from behind the bench, but he followed as Harry sped out of the hall. What did he care what any of them said? If they thought he was running away, well, he was, just not from them. And if Regulus noticed his haste, well, he didn't mention it, even when Harry paused on the other side of the doors, realizing he wasn't sure the other boy had even meant for them to leave. Instead, he took Harry by the elbow and led the way to the next foyer—putting two sets of thick stone walls between him and Quora. Not as much as he would like, but...

Regulus led him off to one side of the foyer, out of the way of the door. It was the main entrance to the castle, which led out to a stretch of lawn nice enough to lounge in during the warmer months, but was still half-covered in snow. Through the window they stood beside, Harry could see down the slope to where the familiar tree sat at the bank of the lake—where almost a year ago now Harry had for whatever reason gone charging in to help Severus against James and Sirius. How long ago that seemed. How... small.

"How are you, Harry?" Regulus asked.

Harry blinked, and turned back to face Regulus. He was startled by the earnest concern on Regulus's face. "I'm... fine, I think?" he answered hesitantly. A lie, considering his heart was still beating in his chest like it was trying to get out, but he wasn't quite sure why Regulus was asking. Not because of
that, surely, and no reason to give Regulus anything to worry about. "Though I guess Mulciber and Avery don't make great company to eat with, so... thanks for coming to rescue me.'"

"Of course. I was surprised to see you eating with them."

"Well, Rosier invited me. He didn't seem any happier with them than I was."

"I imagine not. They come from rather different families," Regulus smiled tightly. "Some families teach their children it's their right by ancestry to be in Slytherin, regardless of whether they actually possess any of the house traits. Avery's only ambition is to be a creep."

"Well, he's a first-rate one, so, uh, good on him, I guess," said Harry. He shifted his bag to his other shoulder. The air was cooler here. It helped. "Did you need something, or did you feel a calling to be my knight in shining armor? Because if so, I think you're supposed to be in Gryffindor, not your brother. No offense meant."

Regulus laughed, but it was half-hearted, and didn’t reach his eyes as they continued to search Harry's face. He seemed to be thinking quite carefully before he spoke. Harry really ought to ask him for lessons on that, it would save him a lot of trouble... and pain.

"Barty said that his tutor was particularly distraught because his roommate went missing this weekend," Regulus said at last. "And Smithe is... your roommate. Your only roommate."

Harry flushed—had news really travelled that fast? But the flush cleared quickly when he realized that if Regulus had heard it, than Quora probably would have as well. Would he be angry that Harry had... drawn attention to himself? Disappeared in a way that could be traced back to him, if anyone thought to look into it?

"I fell asleep working on my homework," he said. He might have been more conscious of the lie, since it was Regulus who he was telling it to, but... Regulus wouldn’t be offended by Harry using him. And he was, or at least was trying to. Regulus was probably the best bet he had at making sure that rumor got spread around, especially through Slytherin, especially with Quora’s spy...

The other boy nodded, accepting it—or that it was Harry’s story, at least. His voice quieted, and he glanced around, as if to make sure they were alone. “You haven’t seemed well, Harry,” he said. “You haven’t seemed well, Harry,” he said, and Harry’s stomach dropped a bit. This was going to be one of those conversations... the type Hector was so fond of. Normally he could bear with them, but at the moment ‘not well’ was so extreme an understatement it made him want to laugh.

Regulus pressed on. “You haven’t been talking to Severus, and you were pale as a ghost, just now. And I’ve heard—” He cut off, chewing his lip, only to catch himself at it and take a deep breath. “I know Sirius has been giving you trouble since you helped Severus out last year. He’s...”

“He’s harmless, really,” Harry said quickly. "He just—I don’t think he ever learned to use words to resolve things."

And, he thought darkly, but didn’t dare add, he’s really protective of you. Overwhelmingly. Almost disturbingly. No need for Regulus to think it was at all his fault.

“He takes after Mother. They say there’s one every generation, a little bit... mad. We’ve got two in ours; cousin Bella and Sirius both. Bella channels it into the Dark Arts, and Sirius—well, it used to be pranks, though Mother did try to steer him to the Dark. It was probably the Black madness that drove him to Gryffindor to begin with. It... encourages that sort of recklessness. Rebelliousness.”

His voice sounded almost bitter. Not about the pranks, but it was almost—was it anger? Or...
jealous? Over what—madness?

“Well, it’s lucky for everyone he didn’t want to learn the Dark Arts,” Harry said, unsure of how to lighten the conversation.

“Oh, he learned. And he’s gifted with them, of course, when he wants to be. Better than I am, with all that magic to feed in… rather like you would be, I think.” He sighed, turning to look at the window, not bothering to elaborate on that afterthought, though Harry had to clench his hand to keep it from shaking. Him? Even legilimency made him sick, on action and on principle. “He doesn’t want it, though, and with that sort of magic, you have to want it.”

“Well, he’s a talented wizard,” Harry said, uncomfortable at where this conversation was going, considering where it was taking place.

“He can be,” Regulus agreed. “Which is why I’m concerned.”

He shot Harry a pointed sidelong glance.

“Oh.” Harry scuffed his feet, running his hand along the rough stone. “I’m more concerned about avoiding Mulciber, really,” he lied. Easier than saying ‘about the Professor I work for’, and safer than saying ‘about the bloody Dark Lord, who for some reason has decided I owe him something’.

“Mulciber? He’s harmless. At least while he’s at Hogwarts. He may be lacking in intelligence, but he knows better than to go after you somewhere he could be traced.”

“That hasn’t exactly stopped him going after… well, I mean… I heard that Norah Khan… She’s not out of the hospital yet…”

“Yes, well. No one he cares to impress would bat an eye over some mudblood, would they? His views may be… somewhat more extreme than the most of us, but he wouldn’t go after you while he was somewhere someone could find out about it.”

“Right…” said Harry skeptically. He stopped listening to Regulus’s words about the moment the slur so easily slipped out. It was so easy to pretend that Regulus didn’t hold that sort of belief when he held his tongue, but… Harry had freely sat at a table full of future Death Eaters, gone to one of their meetings, corresponded with the Dark Lord himself. Why would Regulus expect Harry had any problems with a word, let alone their philosophy? They had never actually discussed it, after all…

“Sirius, on the other hand… Well, he’s never had much respect for anyone, and probably believes that what he does… that people like Dumbledore really approve but just won’t say it out loud.”

Had Severus ever told Regulus about Dumbledore’s non-action after the incident last June? The lecture had apparently worked on James, but Sirius seemed to have missed the point. He’d rather not mention it, though—not that he cared to preserve Sirius’s character, but he did rather care to protect Regulus’s estimation of his older brother from any more damning evidence.

“Either way, I can deal with Sirius. I… I didn’t get top marks in Defense for nothing, you know.”

“Yes, but you’re…” Regulus hesitated. “Well, you’re kind, and that’s not going to get through to him, is it? Don’t look at me like that; it’s a… good thing, usually. I mean, you might want to get it under control, but that’s up to you… I just…”

Well, now Harry was definitely embarrassed, but he wasn’t sure if it was because Regulus thought he was ‘kind’ or because he clearly thought that was a bad thing. It was awkward either way, so both boys just stood there turning red and pretending they weren’t.
“I just mean, if he ever really bothers you, tell me,” Regulus managed to get out. “Slytherins, we stick up for our own, you know? And everyone… well, everyone fourth year and up, if I asked them to, they’d be more than happy to make Sirius regret his actions. He’s—some of them still feel he’s supposed to be a Slytherin, you know, and actually leaving the family… It’s a particularly despicable act. One thing to be disowned, another entirely to leave, and all of us…” He paused again. “Well, all you need to do is ask.”

Harry’s opened his mouth to reject the offer out of hand, closed it again, and stared at Regulus. “Reg,” he said, trying to be delicate. Not in his regular skill set. “He’s—I’m, um, grateful for the offer, I really am, but… he’s your brother. I’m not going to ask you to…”

“It’s not entirely selfless,” Regulus assured him. “Not at all, really. I get a reason, and you get some help dealing with him—if you want it, I mean.”

“…thanks?” Harry tried to smile, but this was really too bizarre for him. “I mean, it’s an, um, generous offer, really… but…”

“You might change your mind.” Regulus shifted his robes about. If he was disappointed, he kept it to himself. “And if you do, it’s an open offer. Don’t even hesitate to ask.” He gave one last encouraging smile—like he was offering to check Harry’s homework, not command Slytherin into vengeance against his own brother—and made to leave. Harry watched him go.

He felt cold. Regulus was one of the Death Eaters—or he would be, far too soon. And here he was offering something that… it wasn’t small, what he was offering. It wasn’t something he would offer unless he cared. A Death Eater, caring…

Not just any Death Eater, though. It was Regulus. It was… well, Harry thought he was a good person, and had circumstances been different, Harry might have considered him a good friend. And so he felt… like he should say something. To warn him, somehow, that it wasn’t worth arguing with Sirius, not when—when they were all in danger from someone much worse.

“Regulus?”

The boy looked back, expectant. “Yes?”


Regulus, of course, smiled, though it didn’t hide the way he looked puzzled. “I’m not the one being harassed, Harry.”

“I know, but… thanks.”

When Regulus disappeared back through the door towards the Great Hall landing, Harry slumped back against one of the stone columns running up along the walls. Alone at last. He resisted the urge to seek out Quora’s presence in the Great Hall. As long as he wasn’t coming Harry’s way—that was all he need to know. He opened and closed his hands, shaking them loosely, but the tremors didn’t stop. He didn’t need to know anything else. He didn’t want to know—it was easier this way. What good would it do him? So maybe Quora ended the game, snapped right then and there and attacked. What good would it do for Harry to know? He’d already proven he was no match for the man—all it
took was a slip of his control and Harry was about as useful as a flobberworm. A bit of pain, and—

He closed his eyes, trying to breathe. Come on, *breath*. Quora wasn’t going to attack anyone—he had a plan, something he wanted. Harry had bad luck, terrible luck, to get caught up in the contract, but mostly the others were safe. Quora wouldn’t risk something like that with someone who people cared about; Harry had gone out of his way to make himself a nobody. That was it, yes—Hector, Pandora, Regulus, Severus, they all had connections. They were going to be okay. Harry just needed to worry about himself. That was what he was supposed to be doing, anyways. Not getting involved with the people here, not—

He took in as deep a breath as he could manage, and pulled himself away from the column. He just had to keep focusing on getting through the day. Worry about classes, and getting through homework, and keeping to himself, and not about things that were out of his control. He didn’t have time for anything else.

Not wanting to return to the Great Hall, he made his way down to the Potions lab, taking a somewhat winding route to avoid running into too many people, walking past the entrance to the Slytherin common room and wondering why he knew where it was. It was still early, but Slughorn always left the classroom door unlocked over lunch, so he went in.

Severus had somehow arrived before him. He must have left the Great Hall right after Regulus’s rescue, though Rosier wasn’t here yet. He was already setting up their usual workspace, cauldron in place and ingredients set out for the potion they were going to work on. Harry stood in the back of the room, unnoticed, not wanting to find out whether Severus’s mind had changed over whether they were speaking or not, until he heard someone else’s footsteps in the hall—James and Sirius. Oh, this was going to go well.

They appeared in the doorway a moment later, and James made no attempt to hide the way he grabbed Sirius’s arm. Sirius was sneering at Harry already. He might have expected it; Sirius always made it expressly clear what he thought of Harry being in the same room as Regulus, and the way they’d left the Great Hall hadn’t exactly been conspicuous. But James pulled him off to their station on the other side of the room, and now that Severus had turned and seen him, there was no point lingering in the doorway. He shuffled forward, and pulled out his textbook to bury himself in until class started, purposefully ignoring everyone else that came in. There wasn’t much of a point in reviewing the recipe, knowing that Severus had probably already marked up his own copy and they would hardly be following the book, but it gave him something to do until Slughorn arrived.

When the Professor did finally shuffle in, he hardly wasted any time before setting them to their task. Severus and Harry glanced at each other, making brief, uncommunicative eye contact before they set about their work. They still functioned reasonably well as a pair, even silent, Harry preparing ingredients as Severus manned the actual brewing, and the precise requirements of the work was a welcome distraction. Soon enough, however, he was out of ingredients to prep, and he found his eyes and his focus drifting across the room.

Now that Regulus had called attention to it, Harry had to admit that Sirius’s attitude towards him was overblown, to say the least. Obsessive? Perhaps, though they hadn’t had *that* many direct interactions. Not one of them had been what Harry would call ‘positive’, though.

It didn’t make much sense—neither the way Sirius treated him nor how easy it was for Harry to let it slide. Sure, Harry had stepped into the incident with Severus during the OWLs, but so had Lily, and Harry didn’t see Sirius giving *her* any grief about it. And from what he gathered, the brunt of the so-called ‘Marauders’ malice had always been directed towards Slytherins, before. If it was because Harry spent so much time around Severus, who Sirius apparently considered the worst of the
Slytherins, then why didn’t Sirius taunt him about his choice in friends? Instead, he always addressed Harry as being independently evil. Sure, Harry had gone to the Halloween gathering of his own, admittedly poorly thought-out, volition, but he spent more time around Hector and Pandora than Severus, and it wasn’t as though he ran around spewing blood purist nonsense. He was a half-blood, for goodness sake, and one with a muggle name himself.

Worse than not knowing what, exactly, had made Harry worse in Sirius’s eyes than anyone else Regulus spoke to (and Regulus being a Slytherin, there were plenty of actually bad influences to be found), Harry was stuck with the unhappy knowledge that Sirius Black was involved enough in his future that nearly any ponderance at all left Harry with a nasty headache. He’d have thoughts that started, “Sirius is a bully, but,” but was left floundering for a way to end to that sentence. There had to be something that would normally fit there, some reason why despite the hostile nature of nearly all their confrontations Harry couldn’t muster more than bemusement towards Sirius’s aggression. It must be quite an excuse, whatever it was, because Harry had just heard Regulus say Sirius was a fair hand at the Dark Arts, and only stubborn rebellion against his family was keeping him from showing that side against him, and yet Harry couldn’t bring himself to worry.

Not to mention that Sirius had apparently upset Regulus enough for the younger Black to offer his influence in Slytherin up as a weapon of defense. Harry imagined that a few short years back, that same influence had been the only thing stopping the Slytherins from seeking all-out, violent revenge against Sirius’s equally nasty attacks. And Regulus had always struck Harry as a mild-mannered, diplomatic sort of person. For him to even suggest turning the likes of Avery and Mulciber against his own brother…

But wouldn’t he be upset, too, if his own older brother had left the family, leaving him behind?

Eventually, Severus cleared his throat and gestured for Harry to pass him the vials—the potion was done. Well earlier than it should have been, but if there was one thing Harry could trust, it was that Severus knew what he was doing when it came to potions. He collected three samples of the potion, one for each of them to turn in and one that disappeared into his bag, while Harry waved Slughorn over.

Slughorn was confused when Severus handed over the vials, and held each up to the light. Each was a deep forest green, looking not unlike the algae samples they had taken from the lake for Herbology last spring. “Remarkable work as ever, boys,” the Professor said. “Although… I’m not sure how you’ve done it… this potion shouldn’t be possible to brew in less than and hour and forty five minutes…”

“We started prepping ingredients before class,” Harry lied. Frankly, he hadn’t paid any attention to what Severus had changed, so who knew why it had only taken—he glanced at the clock behind Slughorn’s desk—an hour twenty two.

Slughorn’s frown deepened. “Yes, well… I suppose the two of you can go early... After cleaning your station, of course. Oh, and don’t forget the essay due Wednesday, boys.”

They cleaned their workstation as silently as the rest of the lesson had been, and when it was done, gathered up their bags and left the classroom, ignoring the questioning glances from their classmates still in the thick of things. It was Charms, next, and they both were in it, and they both left at the same time, so there wasn’t really any reason to split up, but…

They were halfway to the Charms room when Severus spoke. Harry stiffened at the sound of his voice, preparing himself for Severus’s sharp temper—

“When do you have the time to practice again?”
That—that wasn’t what Harry had been expecting. “Practice?”

“Occlumency.”

Occlu—oh. *Oh.* He had—Severus had wanted to learn occlumency. He needed to, and Harry really needed to get some practice in—not that Quora seemed particularly interested in breaking into his mind when he had the option of drawing it out...

He cleared his throat. "Well, I... I've lost my Saturdays, basically, because of... work," he said. "And most of the free periods where I've been doing my homework are now gone, and you have a tougher schedule than I do, anyways..." And he really needed to find time to work on the translation of the journal. Maybe it was something he could plan to do after... after Quora, to clear his head, while it was still just rote translation. Merlin knew it was a necessary distraction...

"So?" said Severus.

Harry sighed. "I dunno," he said. "It'd probably be best if we practiced on our own, got better at it independently, at least until there's more time... doing the meditation exercises any time you have a few minutes, that sort of thing..."

"Right," said Severus. His voice was cool, and he crossed his arms over his chest. "And when, exactly, is there going to be 'more time'?

Harry reached up and tugged at his hair. What did Severus want him to say? 'Well, let's skiv off class and go practice right now, if you're so eager?' He couldn't imagine mustering the energy for it, not now, and... the thought of Severus in his head, where he couldn't just pretend to be fine and laugh away anyone who thought otherwise, was terrifying. Especially because Severus wouldn't be able to see what had happened. The gaes—it was powerful enough to stop him from even thinking Quora's other name. He didn't doubt for a second that it would be powerful enough to keep a legilimens as new as Severus from learning anything it had been put in place to keep hidden. There was even a chance it would lash back at Severus, and... well, Harry didn't really want to risk that. Unfortunately, he wouldn't be able to explain that.

"I dunno," he said, searching for some sort of answer. "Easter?"

"Easter?" Severus echoed.

"Well, we'll have enough time, with the Holiday, and less people around... If Slughorn doesn't give us too much work..."

Severus's dark eyes were narrow. Harry could practically feel the anger simmering, and it wasn't because of the way his magic was rippling. He tried not to think about it. "You expect me just sit around breathing until Easter?"

Harry shrugged. "Look, I don't know what to tell you..."

"That's months away."

"Well," Harry said, stomach twisting as he called up a horrible lie, "We're at Hogwarts, not like anyone here—"

"What the hell are you so scared of?" Severus snapped. "You've already fucked with my mind and fucked off, what else do you—"

"Scared of?" Harry echoed. There were plenty of things he was scared of, none of which he could
explain to Severus, and hardly any of which had to do with him anyways. Severus's unguarded mind was still a liability, but when Harry himself was in danger of being bloody tortured for information, it was rather lower on his list of priorities. And—"I'm not scared of— There's not enough hours in the day for everything on my plate right now. And what do you—you agreed to—"

The hallway in front of the Charms classroom really wasn't the best place for this conversation, but Severus dropped his voice to a barely-audible murmur. "You took my memories, against my better judgement, without waiting for me to prove that it was a drastic, invasive thing to do, and then you disappeared, because, face it, Harrigan: you're a bloody coward."

Harry bristled. That wasn't what he'd done at all! He'd just—

"Oh! Mr. Harrigan!" exclaimed Professor Flitwick, appearing in the classroom door. "I thought I heard you out here. If I could speak with you for just a moment before class begins..."

Harry was gaping at Severus, wanting to defend his intentions from Severus's anger, but... He definitely wasn't going to finish this conversation where a professor could hear it. Occlumency aside, the obfuscus was definitely the sort of spell that would get him into hot water... and if it got back to Quora that he'd used it...

"Of course, sir," he ended up saying, and he turned aside, pushing off the seed of guilt taking root as he walked away from Severus, and followed Flitwick into the classroom and up to the front, where piece of chalk was drawing a complicated diagram on the board and the stacks of books were re-ordering themselves in the air. Harry took a deep breath, adjusting to it. Flitwick's spellwork was as impressive as ever. Not only the sheer amount of magic that the physically tiny professor had mastery over, but also the careful way he distributed it, not an ounce of extra magic wasted on any particular task. It wasn't utilitarian by any means, no; even with the precision, if magic could dance, that's how Flitwick's approached even the smallest task.

"Mr. Smithe was quite upset yesterday, Mr. Harrigan," Flitwick told him. Harry felt Severus slipping into the back of the room. "Ms. Moone informed me that you fell asleep over your homework?"

Harry cringed. Everyone was making such a fuss... which probably meant he had underestimated how upset Hector had been. Which... crap. He needed to—he still couldn't bear even the thought of talking to his friend, but...

"Yes, sir," he said, aware he sounded meek. "I... I'm kind of embarrassed about it, really, falling asleep on my books..."

"Well, it happens to the best of us," Flitwick said. "A thoroughly Ravenclaw trait: when we get caught up in research, there is no stopping us, not even for a bit of rest! However..." And his voice fell a bit, and his eyes looked on Harry with something like... was it pity? "I dare say I have been remiss in my duties as your Head of House. I believe you are taking six NEWT-level courses now? As well as working with Professor Quora? And Professor Dumbledore says you're still doing work for the Oxford Library?"

Harry frowned—was being able to neatly summarizing the elements of his life in a handful of sentences somehow negligent? He only rarely spoke to Flitwick directly, the Professor taking a hands-off, you-know-where-my-office-is approach to being Head of House, so it was somewhat of a surprise that the Professor knew all of that. "Well... yes," Harry answered.

"Not to mention that you've routinely volunteered yourself for extra credit projects... perhaps it would not be so outrageous to suggest that you've been overworking yourself?"
Wincing, Harry shook his head. He really needed to get to work on the project doubling as protections for the book; it had fallen to the wayside with the start of term and Quora's... existence.

"To tell the truth, sir, I've barely gotten started on that." He scratched his head, considering the best way to try and divert Flitwick's concern. "It was just... I've been having trouble getting caught up on the runes work, um, since I just jumped two semesters, and all? And I didn't plan around how much time I would lose on Saturday, helping Professor Quora, and after that I... well, I've just got to work on my time management, I guess."

"Your runes work?" Flitwick raised his thick eyebrows. "Yes... yes, I suppose you would. You know, Clarke would always be willing to lend a hand helping you get caught up? I could talk to her about getting an extra session or two in for you... Or maybe recommend a seventh year to assist..."

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Harry said quickly, alarmed at the thought of drawing even more people into this fiasco. "I just have to sort out my new schedule. I'm terribly sorry about Saturday night, sir.... It won't happen again."

Flitwick squinted up at him, but by now there were other students coming into the classroom. The ones who weren't taking potions, presumably. "See that it doesn't, Mr. Harrigan."

Harry nodded, jumped on the chance to escape the conversation, and turned and quickly found a seat next to Mandy Martins, who had come in early just to cross her arms on the desk and use them as a pillow as she dozed. Harry busied himself taking out his things—the homework he'd finished that morning, his notes, a crooked quill and nearly empty bottle of ink. It was only when the bell rang and the rest of the sixth years began filling in the seats that he looked up again.

Severus was staring at him, arms folded over his chest, from the opposite corner of the room. He didn't seem angry anymore, precisely, but... calculating. Like he was measuring how Harry's interaction compared with theirs—Harry quickly looked away again. It was hard to look at him, now that he'd been inside his head, hard to distinguish what were Harry's usual observations and what were the lingering effects of the legilimency, the sense of knowing. Hard to stomach the memory of how powerful legilimizing Severus had made him feel. Hard to deny Quora's suggestion—Perhaps one day you will become a student of the Dark Arts. You have already delved, after all, and felt their sway.

He tore his eyes away as Cat Sanchez settled in on his right, the seat closest to Flitwick, and greeted her robotically, hoping his smile was convincing. She returned it easily, and without hesitation urged Harry to come to her if he needed help managing his homework. So she, too, had heard... he knew she meant well, but it made it difficult for him to carry on with the optimistic facade. He turned the other way, and found Mandy Martins opening her eyes just enough to visibly roll them; Mandy was brilliant, but also a pinnacle of apathy, especially where schoolwork was concerned. And then, over her shoulder, he saw Hector coming in through the door. He turned his gaze away, trying to find somewhere comfortable to look—but there was Severus, and Rosier filling the seat next to him, and Cyril and Lucinda—and directly across from him, the four Gryffindor boys were just slipping into the open seats. The last chunk of four all together, no doubt, otherwise there was no way you would get Sirius and Pettigrew to sit at the front like that.

Flitwick, luckily, started the lesson as soon as the bell rang, and that gave Harry something to look at. He copied down notes mechanically, trying to keep his thoughts from drifting—but they did, of course they did, with all those distractions across the room from him. Four probable Death Eaters on the left—he couldn't be sure about Lucinda or Cyril, but there they sat—four Gryffindors who took offense at the very notion of the Dark Arts on the right, Sirius on his own a powder keg ready to blow.
He could see it so clearly, the politics being played out in this very room. Who knew how long it would be before these petty classroom rivalries, Slytherin versus Gryffindor, were twisted about into real combatants in a war? Quora was here, scouting them out, and... Harry was beginning to understand Dumbledore. Hogwarts was supposed to be a haven, safe, secluded from the political battles outside. He didn't have to approve of what Dumbledore had done to understand what he meant.

Quora had other plans, clearly, or he wouldn't be here. He wouldn't have his eyes on the students, at least one—one other than Harry—already under his command. Severus wouldn't know that Regulus's owl was the only one in the castle that could reach the Dark Lord reliably. Regulus, Regulus who hadn't even taken his OWLS, wouldn't be attending meetings, and looking on his brother with the eyes of an enemy already. He wouldn't—

A loud bang and burst of movement startled Harry out of his thoughts. Flitwick, in the middle of a particularly vigorous demonstration of a spell, had toppled off his current stand of books, and somersaulted through the air, tumbling in a heap. He leapt to his feet again, hardly missing a beat (it was not precisely an unusual occurrence) but as he stepped back, wand raised to resume his demonstration, he collided with another stack of books, a few feet taller than him. That stack collided with another, even taller, and another, and in an instant where there had been a ring of books arranged in organized chaos was now a landslide of books, which quickly buried the diminutive professor.

The class broke into laughter, though across the room Lily jumped to her feet to help him, followed quickly by Mary, the Marauders, and several of the Hufflepuffs. Harry, meanwhile, sat back in his seat, heart pounding in his chest. Beside him, Mandy was flicking her wand lazily to help pull books out of the way, and several of the others still seated followed suit, turning the classroom into a maelstrom of magic that made the hairs on the back of his arms stand up on end. It was just a regular class, though—there was no real danger here. There weren't any threats, only—only kids, and Flitwick with his usual clumsiness, completely unmatched to the magical finesse he demonstrated as he came free of the avalanche and set the books back into place, only—laughter.

Laughter. Again. If seemed to rattle around his chest.

Flitwick was tomato red with embarrassment as everyone settled back into their usual seat, and rather than risk standing on the books again, he walked into the center of the room and began his demonstration again. They were discussing—Harry glanced down at his notes—illusions. The type that created actual images projected in the air, not the type that messed with people's minds. And while they were at the beginning of this area of study, Flitwick was always the sort to lead by inspiration, not practicality.

As he took his casting stance again, his wand outstretched above his head with his other hand in the air beside it, Harry leaned forward in his seat. He was tempted to close his eyes, to forget everything else but the magic, channelling through Flitwick's whole body and through his wand like air through a master's instrument, but—this was a chance, he thought. This beautiful demonstration, and he could get lost in it—

He took a deep breath, pushing away his thoughts of the magic itself and focusing on the shifting light, the smell like coming rain, the wide eyes of his classmates as the illusion began to take form. A shroud of darkness began to fill the tall ceiling of the room, spreading out from the glimmers of magic, and slipping slowly down until the walls had completely disappeared from view, and as the last light of the tall windows behind Flitwick's books disappeared they were immersed in it, lit only by the sparks of magic drifting out from the Professor's wand. Harry wasn't sure whether he was feeling them or seeing them; it wasn't unlike when he and Severus had cast the spell to visualize
magic. And these began to divide out even further, spreading up into the dark, hovering in the air around them until—

Harry nearly jumped as he felt something moving at his feet, regardless of how he had felt the magic. A moment later, Robin Wing let out an alarmed squeak, and soon everyone was looking down—and finding that the floor was sprouting grass, soft and thick. Harry could hear the excited cooing of some of the Hufflepuff girls, reaching down to stroke it like it was an animal, but where a few blades pushed up through the ankles of his pants it was like being brushed with static electricity. It was, for all tactile reasons, real—he didn't doubt the number of years that Flitwick had put into being able to conjure something so complex, with the smell and the touch and even the slightly chilly breeze that seemed to be drifting through the room, but he supposed it was like walking into a room full of speakers blasting a concerto at full volume. He could tell that it was lovely, could see that several others in the room had their breath stolen by the demonstration, but it was too much, too...

Flitwick let the spell fall, and Harry's sigh of relief was drowned out among the disappointed groans of his classmates. The magic dispersed quickly, but it had been so much that as the illusion vanished and the windows filled the room with white light again, the hair on his arms stood on end, and every inch of his clothes felt like they were scratching at his body. Not pleasant, exactly, but a relief after the intensity.

He eyed Flitwick with new respect as some of the others started clapping, watched as the man bowed with a pleased flush on his face.

He'd felt the strength of his magic before, with the fireworks over the lake on New Year's, but that had been at a safe distance, with alcohol in his gut. Flitwick was easily one of the most powerful of the Professors here. Not quite at the level of Dumbledore or Quora, with either of their overwhelming strengths, but he was capable of working spectacularly complex spells with the utmost control, and so perfectly measured his output that he hardly seemed winded after what he had just done, his magic realigning with his body in such a way that it was nearly indistinguishable to how it was before. It made the students around him look even younger, with their varying degrees of control over their abilities, a difference that was further highlighted as Flitwick set them about a practice exercise.

"Begin small, with something you know very well," Flitwick encouraged. "You would be surprised how difficult it is to make a convincing illusion off of only memory—think about your earliest attempts at Transfiguration, when you struggled to understand something as simple as a needle, hm? I suggest you try something like your quill."

He demonstrated once more with a casual flick of his wrist, a perfect quill hanging in the air in front of him. Harry, who would have known it was there without the visual, stared at it, clenching his fist. How easy it was to know this illusion. Clear as daylight. Why, then, was he still uncertain as to whether Quora had actually broken his fingers or not?

Well, one thing was certain. With all the magic in the room, Harry would hardly be focusing enough to make magic like this work. It seemed several of his classmate were having just as much trouble, as when they casted, well... Harry could feel the magic channelling through their wands, but it wasn't even beginning to coalesce into a single shape before it dispersed. As the class went on, it just meant that more of the magic that had previously been at least somewhat contained was now floating free. He scowled, listlessly practicing the wand motions whenever Flitwick looked his way, feeling the familiar nausea curling in his gut. He couldn't ask to go to the infirmary, no, not now, not when he already had people worrying about him, because they wouldn't know this was unrelated to his absence that weekend. And just as he was becoming desperate to ask to be excused to the restroom, Flitwick halted the practice, asking for volunteers.
Harry ground his teeth, but sat quiet. At least it would only be one person at a time casting, this way. He focused on Mandy, her magic swirling lethargically around her, and on his breathing, and brought up his occlumency again. It wouldn't do much good in actually blocking the magic, but it made him calmer. That he might not think of anything... what a hopeful concept.

"Miss Evans!" Flitwick squeaked as Lily put her hand into the air. "Will you demonstrate for us? Yes, yes, give it a go!"

Lily was sitting in the center of the front row on the opposite side of the room. James was elbowing Sirius to pay attention, craning his head to get a good look at her—their relationship had been on uncertain grounds since the Halloween date, with Lily refusing to confirm that they were 'dating', and James continuing his besotted puppy eyes whenever she was in the room. But at the moment, he wasn't the only one: Lily was known for being one of the best students their year for charms, and this spell had everyone excited.

If it had been anyone else to do it, it would have been cheesy, but when Lily waved her wand in a figure eight and the image of a plant began to grow up from the desk, a lone bud on a stalk amidst the long leaves opening and uncurling into the single petal of a white lily, it was too impressive to find fault. She often used lilies in her spellwork—her transfigurations might have floral patterning, and where she had an opportunity like this to create anything she wanted no one was surprised.

Flitwick squeaked in delight "Fantastic, Miss Evans! Ten points to Gryffindor. If I may..." He leaned forward, and passed his hand easily through the image. "Well, you have a clear direction! Who else?"

Of course after that no one wanted to demonstrate their shadowy images of quills, which was unfortunate, because it meant that Flitwick decided to go around the room one student at a time, and all of them had to give it a go. Kirke managed to create an image that he could pick up, although it was not entirely tangible, given that his fingers passed right through the barbs of the feather rather than squishing them into the stem. Next to him, Floyd tried to do the same, and managed to hold a decent image for a minute before it turned to a strange sludge, which while just as illusory as the quill had been still managed to smear the notes on his page. Magic. Harry, for his part, had not yet tried the spell, so it was a surprise when he managed to create a vaguely pencil-like object. He wasn't sure if being followed by Mandy, who waved her wand carelessly and still managed to make a perfectly normal, uninteresting rock, was better for his image or worse.

Their homework was to practice, and to expect to demonstrate what they had accomplished in class on Friday, where Flitwick would evaluate them for the realism of their illusion, no matter how large or small. Harry stiffened, expecting that he was going to set them back at it now—not an unusual pattern of the class for Flitwick—but the bell rang before he could.

Enthused as they were by the assignment, and having reached the end of classes for the day, the students moved from their seats much slower than usual, and so Harry packed his things as quickly as he could and hurried out before the most of them, intent on disappearing back down to the kitchens for the rest of the evening. The elves would be familiar magic, and too busy preparing dinner to worry about him, and if Hani was there he could get some of that tea, and—

He was grabbed before he could get away, though, by—Lily. His heart gave an inexplicable twinge, something beyond—she let go of him quickly when she saw his wide-eyed panic, and Harry pulled his arm to his chest, taking deep breaths. Occlumency, Harry, he thought, wondering if it was possible to completely occlude something that ran as deep as fear.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to—can I talk to you for a minute?”
And that was how they ended up hurrying around the corner before the rest of the class caught up with them, ending up in a dead end with only a door out to a walkway around the outside of the building, locked tight during the winter so no one slipped on the ice. It wasn’t the kitchens, but it was at least away from the worst of the loose magic…

“What did you need?” he asked.

“I heard about this weekend,” Lily began, and Harry groaned.

“Sorry,” he said. “It seems like everyone knows. I just want to forget about it—it’s embarrassing.”

Lily crossed her arms over her chest. “Embarrassing to know that people are worried about you?” she asked. Harry winced.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know,” she said, just as quickly. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be… long day. Black is…” She sighed, shaking her head, long strands of red hair falling out from behind her ears. “He’s a nuisance, but you know that.”

“Er… yeah.”

“Look, I just wanted to say… you don’t have to manage this alone,” she said. “There’s a reason we have the revision group still going, you know. I know Hector kind of dragged you into it, and you’ve never been exactly… enthusiastic about it, but if you need help…”

“Cat already gave me this… she already reminded me,” Harry amended. “And I—thanks, um, Lily. But, I don’t think this is exactly a group problem to solve; I’ve just got a lot on my plate and need to find time to work on it all.”

“Well, she and Hector are both doing nine NEWTs. If anyone could help you sort out your time…”

“Yeah,” he said. “I… thanks.”

She sighed. “You’re not going to ask anyone for help, are you,” she said, slumping. “You know, I… I don’t know how you still spend so much time with S… with Snape, him being as he is, but maybe you’re not that different from him.”

“...excuse me?”

“I don’t mean—I mean that you’re both ridiculously stubborn!” she said. “Third year, when we first started electives? He was in the hospital wing for a few weeks, wouldn’t let anyone help him get caught up.” Lily scowled at the memory, and shook her head again. “Look, if you won’t ask for help, at least do your work with someone. That way you won’t fall asleep out there on your own. Unless you were out there cavorting with Regulus Black, and this is all just a cover-up?”

“Unless I was— what?” Harry groaned. “I thought it was just Sirius who thought that!”

“It is, but he’s rather loud about it.”

“It’s Regulus who he’s really causing problems for, like that,” Harry muttered. “Can you… I dunno, get James to talk sense into him?”

“I might be able to,” Lily said. She had a gleam in her eye, and Harry realized she’d been baiting him and sighed.
“Well, now I see why you hung out with him for all those years,” he said.

“I take offense to that.”

“You’re the one trying to blackmail me.”

“For your own good,” she said. “I’ll talk to James, if you go to someone for help sorting out your schedule. It—look, I know you don’t know me that well, but it can be me, if that’s easier than Smithe. I’m not going to knock down your pride. Or it could be a professor—I bet Flitwick would help you. You’re a Ravenclaw, he’s nice—”

“He already tried,” Harry admitted.

“And you turned him down, of course. Well, what about that Professor Quora? You’re working for him, right? He’d probably be willing to help you get it sorted out, if only so your homework isn’t cutting into the time you’re supposed to spend with him…”

Harry thought about telling Quora he needed help timing his homework and nearly snorted. Maybe he’d have done it if Harry hadn’t known who he was, to keep up the pretense… but frankly, even after Harry had seen him in action several times, Saturday had only made his inability to see the man as a teacher even worse. “Definitely not,” he said.

“So if I happen to egg Sirius on a bit…”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

Harry opened his mouth, but closed it, realizing he wasn’t really sure. There was definitely a gap in his memory where she was concerned, but it wasn’t as present as the ones he encountered thinking fairly normal thoughts about Sirius, or even Severus.

“So?” she pressed. “What will it be?”

Harry sighed, and thought about it again. There was no way he was going to Hector about this—Hector would be overjoyed, but then he would also be worried, and since Harry had never asked for help before he’d probably blow it out of proportion. And while Pandora was a good person, and had somehow ended up knowing the most about his situation than anyone else, she wasn’t exactly an organizational inspiration. Cat was overbearing, Mandy didn’t care, Kirke and Floyd had only a month ago cornered him to ask him if he and Severus were and item and—

Well, that was an option.

“Severus,” he said, and he blinked as realization bloomed. “I’ll—look, can you talk to James? I need to—”

“You’re going to ask Severus for help?” she said. She looked disappointed.

“No, I’m going to—yes. I’m going to get help from him.” He paused, reaching out—Severus’s magic was easy to trace, since Harry knew him so well and he had just been casting in class and he was still close, heading towards—the Library, probably. “Right now, actually. So? James?”

“I’ll talk to him,” she agreed. “But you should really—”

“Thanks,” Harry said, and he turned, hurrying away.
It was an easy solution, to multiple problems. Severus was annoyed that Harry hadn’t involved him more in the *obfuscus*? It was probably just a matter of control. It wasn’t occlumency, but… Flitwick had reminded Harry that he needed to ward and hide the book. It would be an important part of keeping Harry’s memories safe, and Severus would probably feel more secure if he was directly involved in the protections, so he knew exactly where the key was…

“*Muffliato,*” Harry said as he slipped into the seat across from Severus in the library. At their usual table—was that a good sign? Severus looked up sharply, and raised an eyebrow as he watched Harry fall into his seat. “I need your help.”
“Can I sit here?”

Harry slowly tore his eyes away from the page of his Ancient Runes textbook, but it took him a few seconds of staring at Regulus before his brain caught up to him. Regulus. Asking to sit with him in the library? And Severus wasn’t even there.

Which was for the better, really, because while Severus had eventually agreed to help Harry find protective charms for the book, it had been a conversation that left Harry’s cheek sore from biting it as he was verbally strung up, flayed, and tossed aside. They’d agreed, as Harry understood it, to do research in their own time and meet up again in a few weeks when, as Severus put it, the sight of Harry wasn’t so likely to make him expel his lunch over their research materials, and when Harry’d had some more time to learn the most basic definition of guilt and humility.

He was being dramatic, Harry thought, but after that it had been apparent to both of them that they’d be better off maintaining the whole silent treatment. So they still weren’t talking, or sitting together, but…

At least Severus wasn’t yelling at Harry about the obfuscus in the halls anymore. They were both far too busy for that.

But Regulus, he wasn’t involved, and he was looking down at Harry expectantly.

“Uh—of course—I mean, let me just…”

Regulus slid into Severus’s usual seat as Harry pushed his papers aside. “Thank you. The common room was rather loud and after Quora’s class—well, I’ve got loads of revisions to do.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder to squint at the clock on the far wall—it was almost five thirty. He’d been working on his Runes assignment since three, and wasn’t really getting anywhere, so Regulus was a welcome distraction. “Right, you just came from Defense, I suppose.”

“I was surprised you weren’t there.” Regulus opened his bag, drawing out his textbook and a folio not unlike the ones Quora used, though rather more crowded with a thick stack of sheets of parchment, and glanced over at Harry as he found a quill and ink. “On Tuesday, I just assumed you had another class to be in, but then, it’s NEWT History at the same time as OWL Defense, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I was just there last week to help proctor the test,” Harry explained. “I won’t be doing any TA-ing in your year, except for practice exams and that sort of thing. It’s just the second and fourth years that I’m helping with. And Wednesday office hours, though… I’m not really much use for that.”

“Why do you say that?”

Harry blinked, realizing he’d probably said too much, and fishing for an out. “The only person who came this week was—ah, well, I actually can’t say. But there were tears.”

Regulus arched an eyebrow. “Tears? In Professor Quora’s office? He doesn’t seem the type you’d want to emote to.”
Regulus didn’t know the worst of it. The face Quora had made when Harry had finally managed to enter his office after standing outside, pale and shaking, had been one of such scorn for the display of emotions Harry might have laughed if he’d been able. Luckily a few of the first years whose papers had been illegible came in for help, and Harry had taken them down to the classroom and taught them how to hold a quill and had almost been able to forget where he was, with Quora safely on the other side of the wards.

“He may have implied that if work was beyond her, she could him the trouble drop the class.”

“Oh. Poor dear. Well, he did assign us a rather terrible workload. I imagine it’s much the same for you? Did he give your class a talk about how dreadfully behind you all were?”

“Something to that order,” Harry said dryly. “You got the results of the mock-OWL back, then? How did you—I mean, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“Don’t you already know?”

“I’m only grading the kids’ stuff.” Harry shifted in his seat, uncomfortable with the way Regulus seemed to make the same automatic assumption that all the rest of the Slytherins had. Well, at least he wasn’t implying anything crass, like Mulciber and Avery had been intent on doing.

“That makes sense. Not that I doubt your abilities, but it would be strange to have a sixth year grading fifth year work.”

From near the top of his stack of parchments, Regulus removed the sheet of questions from the mock exam, though each one now had a number beside it printed in red ink and familiar handwriting, and in the top left was an elegant ‘O’.

“Well, you’re all set, then,” Harry said, blinking in slight surprise. Hadn’t he said he had ‘loads of revisions’ to do? “No need to worry about revisions for Defense, at least.”

Regulus gave him a slight smile. “The Professor graded on a curve,” he explained, tucking it back away again. “So there’s still plenty to go over, mostly things we haven’t covered in class yet. Though I will admit,” his voice dropped a bit, and he glanced around, though he made no real impression that he was particularly worried about what he was about to say, “being from an old Dark family does have its advantages.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Right. Yeah, that would… prior experience, and all.”

“And you?” Regulus asked, brushing past Harry’s awkwardness easily. “You didn’t take a mock OWL, I assume, but the Professor must have given you some impression of how you are doing by now.”

“Er,” said Harry, rubbing his fingers with his thumb. He’d tried to occlude away the question of whether or not Quora had actually broken them, but the ache had lasted through the week. The number of times he’d dropped his quill… And his handwriting was coming messier than the first years he’d been helping. “I’m not sure whether he likes me or thinks I’m an idiot. He’s… kind of like Severus, that way.”

Regulus laughed softly as he flipped through his textbook. “Unfortunately, Severus considers most everyone idiotic, I think. Merlin knows— You’ve heard him hex me sideways for my brewing—he did so literally, once. But he does like you well enough. Perhaps Quora is the same.”

Harry shrugged, looking down at his work again. Considering the strain on his and Severus’s… acquaintanceship at the moment, that wasn’t terribly comforting.
Nor the thought that he’d want Quora to like him. If he did, that almost made things worse—he treated Harry awfully already, imagine if Harry was someone he truly hated…

The ink on his quill had been dripping and drying while he spoke, and Harry pulled his wand out to spell it clean. When he looked up again, Regulus had gotten to work. Harry watched him for a minute, quill moving across a fresh sheet of parchment in perfectly controlled script letters, but realized quickly that to anyone who saw him he must look like a creep and turned back to his own work.

That consisted of a pile of scrap parchment, each bit filled with the barest sketches of runic circle, each of these marked with increasingly frustrated commentary on the way each went wrong.

It was the first time Harry had had trouble with his runes work. It seemed so silly to get frustrated over homework, but… When he’d started, he’d been far ahead of the third years just starting out, since he’d already had the alphabets and its basic meanings memorized and had put that knowledge into fierce practice in his translations. He’d managed wards fairly easily, as well, as they were in the simplest form a runes arranged into ‘words’ and ‘words’ chained into ‘sentences’—sometimes to the point of actually transcribing Latin or Greek or another language—and constructing the ward was, at the basic level, a matter of arranging these. Of course, any complex ward was much more involved than that, and the Null Ward had certainly been ‘complex’, but the changes he had made to the initial diagram had been minor.

Now, however, they were working on creating runic spells from scratch. They were deceptively simple tasks—mostly they had been assigned things like ‘activate the rune to start a fire’ and the like. Where it got troublesome was in narrowing the focus of the spell; though kenaz on it’s own could set its object alight with enough intent from the caster, it could also activate as kaun and leave the unwitting activator with blistered hands. If an enchantment was going to be written for someone else to activate, it was important to add additional clauses to define exactly what the activation was to begin.

The problem with that was that once runes were put next to each other, they began to form ‘words’ on their own. If you wanted light, you might put kenaz next to sowilo, hoping that ‘torch’ and ‘sun’ would play off of each other to make a powerful and lasting defense against darkness. But unless it was tempered with the cooling influence of isaz, the combination would invariably lead to an explosion—only in its purest form isaz could not immediately follow sowilo, or it would be destroyed and the chain of the circle broken, and the explosive pair would inevitably blow up despite efforts. Of course, when the runes were being used as phonetic units, none of that mattered—unless the one activating it failed to realize that it was being used with an audible component, in which case it was up to the intent of the original writer to come through and hold it all together.

What that amounted to was a list of rules that could—and had—filled books. And somehow, despite his initial feelings that he could work on intuition as he had with the wards, it seemed like every time Harry found a solution he just as quickly realized some fault in it, and once a single error was revealed, the whole chain would unravel and he would have to start over from scratch.

Worse, when he did find a solution, it was proving wholly unsatisfying. It felt arbitrary, like the rules were the bureaucracy of a government doing no-one any good. He could logically interpret the symbols, but they had no resonance, and for that, his circles were underpowered things, just barely fitting the parameters of what they intended to.

Harry couldn’t remember a time when his magic had been underpowered. Even when he had been learning the patronus—lessons which he only vaguely remembered, and yet—his problem had never been in not having enough power. Once he got the spell to work, if by a somewhat unconventional
approach to finding the proper mindset, there were full-grown adults who couldn’t have conjured a patronus as powerful as Harry’s was.

Barely scraping by for assignment after assignment wasn’t just bruising to his ego. It felt like weakness. And with his recent experiences, incapable of truly defending himself from Quora’s control and curses, the only suitable response to weakness was to clench his jaw and try harder.

It felt like using a hammer to beat down a screw. Only less effective, and far more disheartening.

At last he cast aside his quill and glared down at the parchment in disgust. It wasn’t working! Any way he tried it, the runes just didn’t agree. He’d make some progress but then he’d work through it and find that it made something wrong that didn’t agree with the rest of the structure and it wasn’t supposed to be this hard! Runes never were. And Hector had gotten it finished while they were in class and hadn’t been any help at all and now he was off at his gobstones club and even if Harry wanted he couldn’t ask…

As Harry ran his fingers through his hair, tugging at it, Regulus looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. “Is everything alright?” he asked.

“My homework is impossible,” he said flatly.

“I…” Regulus blinked at him, assuming a rather pained smile. “I can’t imagine that a Professor would assign you something impossible? Except perhaps Professor Quora.”

“He does seem like the type,” Harry agreed, failing to hold back a snort of agitated laughter. “But no, it’s not him. It’s runes.”

“Runes? Aren’t you… well, Severus says that ward project you were working on was really NEWT-level materials, and that you’ve only studied it for a year.”

“Severus said…?” That, at least, halted Harry’s ire for a moment, though only into confusion as to why either of them would be discussing him. Maybe Severus had mentioned their ‘Charms’ project? But it was only a moment. “It was OWL work—I mean, it was my OWL grade, not NEWT stuff. And it was… well it wasn’t easy, but it all made sense. It was just a matter of doing it. But this—it’s supposed to just be a simple enchantment, but… Argh!”

“Well, what’s the enchantment supposed to do?” Regulus asked, leaning over to look at the scraps Harry had scattered around them. “I’ve only had the barest experience with runes, of course, and that was before Hogwarts started, with an over-ambitious tutor. But maybe I can be some help?”

Harry sighed, and pushed his latest attempt towards the other boy. “We’re supposed to charm a paper to record a voice message. So you activate it once to record a message, and then again to hear the message back. Like a… cassette tape.”

“A what?”

“Er… like a record player. A gramophone,” Harry amended. He supposed Regulus Black, pureblood, wouldn’t know what a cassette tape was, but gramophones were rather readily in use in the wizarding world.

“That sounds fairly complex, for a simple spell.”

“Well, it should be just a four-part spell—see how I’ve got those four runes bigger? There’s the speaker and the listener on the top and bottom, and then the cue for the spell to activate on the left, and the audio on the right. It’s theoretically easy to link them with standard chains, but those four bits
need to be clear or it won’t work at all, and so far…”

As he spoke, he glared down at his work, and the key runes that so stubbornly disagreed with one another.

“Well… I probably won’t be able to help you,” Regulus decided, sitting back down. “Have you asked any of your classmates?”

“Hector tried to help in class, but he just got me more confused,” Harry said sourly. “And Severus and I don’t approach these things the same way at all.”

“What about the professor? That’s… Professor Notaro, right? Could she help?”

Harry considered it. He’d never gone to Notaro for help with classwork, only his special projects. “I don’t know… it’s due tomorrow…”

It was Regulus’s turn to glance at the clock. “Well, it’s still a quarter ’til. Office hours go until six—you could still make it.”

Harry looked down at his latest iteration, frowned, and realized he there was no harm in trying. “Yeah, alright,” he agreed slowly. Then, realizing he only had fifteen minutes to get to Notaro and press her for answers, he hurried to stuff the scraps of parchment into his bag. “Good plan. Thanks, Regulus.”

“Of course,” said Regulus. “I am sorry I cannot be of more… direct assistance.”

“That’s alright,” he repeated, and hurried out, mind turned getting to Notaro before dinner.

“Mr. Harrigan,” Notaro said as she looked up from the papers she was marking. “Good evening. Please, take a seat.”

“Good evening,” he replied, voice coming out rather strained. He sat down in the chair, and she waved her wand and a kettle appeared to pour him a mug of tea. He accepted it, twisted it a few times in his hands, and set it back down as the professor took a long sip of her own.

“So,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s the homework,” he said, feeling silly.

“Go on.”

“I—I haven’t been able to work it out. I’ve tried—well, I can’t say everything, because I’ve not figured it out yet and it has to be possible or you wouldn’t have assigned it, but I can’t—”

He cut off, unsure of how to explain his conundrum. This was so new to him. Even when he’d been working on his modified null ward, he’d only needed to ask a few, specific questions to overcome his rough patches, and then he’d been off and running again.

“Yes,” he said, pressing one thumb into the heel of the other palm. “I know it’s supposed to be simple enough—Hector got it in class, but I… I haven’t…”

“Well, alright,” she said mildly, gesturing to the blackboard. “Show me what you’ve worked out so far.”

“Well,” he said, picking up a piece of chalk and scribbling out the section he’d worked out. “This bit is for the audio cue of the spell, which is connected in this triangle here, and bound by ansuz, or os, really, for the meaning of ‘mouth’. And then I’ve put the speaker and the listener at the top and bottom, and both of them are bound by mannaz. But then on the right… well that would be the section to activate it, but every time I start I mess up.”

He set the chalk down and found himself pacing as he tried to put words to his frustration. “It’s got to be something to balance ansuz, since I’ve repeated mannaz. But os is also god or Odin, and the variations are oak and ash. So I could pair it with berkanen for birch, but that berkanen doesn’t like to activate anything on its own, and eihwaz would hold the message but not give it up. I’d go for sowilo, to balance Odin with the sun, but sowilo doesn’t agree with ansuz—”

"Mr. Harrigan," Notaro said with a gentle laugh. "Sit down. You're making both of us dizzy."

Sighing (and more than a bit embarrassed) Harry took a seat, and accepted his cup of tea when she pushed it towards him.

“Now,” she said, after they’d both had a sip from their cups. “I can see that you are very frustrated. Sometimes I forget that we’ve pushed you through three years of class at double time, and that does mean we’ve probably missed a few things here or there along the way. It is perfectly acceptable for you not to understand something, but it is not worth getting upset over. We can work this out. Frankly, I’d be more concerned if you weren’t struggling here.”

“Why?” Harry asked, when she paused for another sip of tea.

She hummed as the steam clouded up her glasses, and with her free hand she took them off, letting them hang from a cord strung with jewel-toned glass beads that hung around her neck. “Do you know why we use runes?” she asked him, instead of answering.

Harry scowled at his mug. “This is one of those questions where I am going to be wrong no matter what I say, and you’re going to come in with some life-altering answer, and make me feel like I’ve been doing runes wrong all along.”

The professor laughed. “You’ve spent too much time with Albus, I think, my dear,” she said kindly. “He does do that, doesn’t he? And I suppose that could be what happens here, but I doubt it. And I would like you to answer, even if you think it’s wrong, because it will help me figure out how to explain it to you.”

Sighing with frustration, Harry took a sip of tea to collect his thoughts on the matter, ignoring the steam. She was far too patient—it made Harry feel bad when he made mistakes like this—like the time he’d had a translation code off by one rune and came to vent about five hours of work that was all wrong. This was more than that, and he didn’t know what sort of mistake he was making, but when she was so bloody kind he had to answer her civilly.

“The runes form a physical representation of a spell circle—”

He cut off when the professor shook her head. “Why runes,” she repeated. “Why not just use our Roman alphabet?”
Harry frowned. “Because whoever invented the magic wasn’t Roman?”

She laughed again. “Well, it is true that tradition plays a role. But we learn several different variations on the runes once used for written language, and beyond that there are the quasi-language runes that have never been used as a representation for an in-use language—outside of personal cyphers, of course. But if it was just a matter of the runes being in use commonly at the advent of runic magic, then why, when the tradition was brought to the British Isles, did the wizards there not translate it to use Roman characters? What differentiates the alphabets?”

“Roman characters don’t have individual meanings,” Harry answered after thinking about it for a while. “The runes—they mean something, on their own.”

“Exactly,” Notaro said. She set down her tea cup and went to the blackboard, flipping it over to the clean side. Picking up the chalk, she drew ansuz, and beside it the letter ‘A’. “The runes came with meaning. Roman letters, on the other hand, we just see as tools for phonetic representation of language. However—” She paused and rapped her knuckles on the frame, stirring up chalk dust as she looked back to him. “What gives letters meaning at all? Why does this represent ‘A’ and not, oh, ‘F’?”

“Because that’s the way the language is set up.”

“And who set it up that way?”

Harry shrugged, trying to hide his irritation. “Romans, I suppose. I doubt anyone’s got record of who exactly invented it.”

“So it was people who invented it.”

“Well, I guess.”

“And since they said ‘this is ‘A’’, that was that. Then if it had been declared the letter ‘F’ instead, and what you know as ‘F’ was ‘A’, would it really change anything?”

“I… suppose not. In the long run.”

Notaro smiled at him, though Harry wasn’t quite sure what she aimed for with this, other than to try and distract him from his troubles with the assignment. Then she tapped the chalk next to the ansuz she had drawn. “And this—if, when they were ‘inventing’ runes, if they had said this was fehu and fehu was ansuz, would we know today?”

He looked at her perfectly proportioned drawing of it, not a wobble in the lines or any discrepancy in the angle of the two diagonal arms. “But the shape matters, at least when we are casting,” he complained. “We have to be so careful to write them perfectly, or the circle could wrong. So there has to be some difference.”

Notaro set the chalk down, clapped her hands to free the clinging dust from her fingers, and returned to her seat at the desk across from Harry. “Set that aside for the moment. What separates ansuz and fehu?”

“They—a—a lot of things. They mean different things. That’s what they are.”

“So if I tell you that to me ansuz will to me always carry personal meanings that would never occur to you, and that I can employ these magically, would you believe me?”

Harry squinted at her. “You’re the Professor.”
Notaro chuckled, waving over the teapot to pour her more tea. “Language is a living thing, Mr. Harrigan. In the spoken form, the language that we speak now and the language we will speak in a few hundred years may both be called English, but the vocabulary and even grammar will have shifted. In the written language—well, thank goodness for standardized spelling, but consider how we spell words and how the Americans do. And I’m sure you’ve done enough work with cyphers by now to know that people form their own rules all along. I speak a different form of English than you do, as we were born in different times and grew up in different circumstances, but that doesn’t mean that one of us is speaking something that is more ‘English’ than the other.”

“But runes are—they’re from a dead language. Like Latin,” Harry argued. “Latin isn’t growing as a language, since no one speaks it as their first language any more. If it were people would have simplified the verbs by now.”

“Ah, and perhaps merged it with a few other languages—those spoken by the locals in the areas the Romans conquered—and let it stew for a few thousand years? So that people who speak other languages which developed alongside it could call it French, or Italian, or Spanish?”

Harry toyed with with his teacup, pushing the handle with his index finger so spin it around in the saucer. “If all of this is to tell me that runes are—that the meanings don’t matter…”

“Oh, they do,” the Professor assured him. “Don’t worry, Mr. Harrigan; we wouldn’t waste time studying dead languages if they didn’t have purpose.”

“But you said—we could switch ansuz and fehu—”

“So long as the meaning is assigned and preserved, we could. The shape of the mark itself doesn’t matter so much, so long as the meaning is preserved.”

“But the shape does matter!”

She raised an eyebrow, and Harry realized he’d raised his voice again, and shrunk back into his chair, flushing. “As I said before: set that aside for now. The meaning is what we are more interested in.”

She too sat back in her chair as if collecting her thoughts, but her fingers (long, bony, and not without wrinkles) danced about in the steam from her tea cup, and with an apparently subconscious burst of magic she had the steam twisting into the forms of the runes they were discussing. Harry blinked at the display—wandless magic? He’d never thought her powerful enough for that, but she seemed to do it without even noticing. Harry’s mind fell back on the conversation with Severus about elemental affinities, and wondered if steam counted as water or air. Water, probably, since Quora had said that clouds would be water—but Severus had said that air was synonymous with gas, and wasn’t steam a gas? Where did vapor sit into the model—it only supported his theory that ‘elemental’ magic was too wishy-washy to be a real form… But when her magic stopped and she picked up the cup of tea again, Harry could only shake his head, irritated with having gotten distracted by the professor, again.

“Language—words, letters, sounds—it means something because we make it mean something,” Notaro said thoughtfully. “Obviously there is a lot more to the psychological and physical development of language within any individual person, but on the whole—if I invent a new thing, and I create a new word to name it, so long as that word obeys the basic rules of English, if my invention becomes the next big thing in society its name will very quickly fit into most everyone’s personal dictionary, or if not the name I chose some nickname it’s been given. So long as everyone has some understanding of what a given word is representing, it can be used to communicate ideas to other people. When you teach someone a word, you are in a way broadening their experience of the
world—I can tell you that capybaras are the world’s largest rodent even compared to their magical relatives, and you will then have a word to put an upper limit on rodent size.”

“What does that have to do with runes?” said Harry blankly.

“The reason we use runes for magic is because we have set guidelines for how to use them. They can be used phonetically to overlap with magical quasi-Latin, they can be used symbolically to represent ideas without a corresponding means of vocalizing it, and they have hundreds of years of people having already done that for us to study and learn from. We have a collective idea of what ansuz means that goes well beyond what was originally intended, and even more amazing—we all have individual, personal meanings that go along with them.”

“Like you said you do for ansuz.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I think you’ve fallen into the trap of thinking too hard about it, and you need to follow your magic more. This is magic, Harry, not star-counting. Now. You said berkanen and eihwaz as trees to balance ansuz. I think eihwaz should be your hint, or, rather, its pair. The other ‘yew’, which is…?”

“Algiz,” he answered. “Or yr, really, for ‘yew’. But algiz is elk—and I don’t think an elk or a yew is going to counterbalance Odin.”

Notaro tilted her head in thought. “But some of the other meanings might. ‘Protection’ for algiz—you must have run across that meaning, in your research for wards? And ‘death’ for yr. I think that ‘death’ could stand opposite to ‘god’, at least when held between two mannaz.”

Harry thought about it. The bell rang, but he hardly noticed, and Notaro didn’t seem to be eager to move. He hadn’t considered algiz at all, and he juggled his thoughts of it around in his mind, struggling to pull it all together into one thought. “But doesn’t algiz disagree with mannaz, since mannaz can be used for ‘life’? And how does that help activate the spell? Protection could be to hold it, but activating it…”

“Well, if you must pursue the structure you’re going for, you could look beyond the Furthark sets. In the Midlands Coven’s set, they use a sideways algiz as a broom, with the meaning of ‘flight’. But run me through the structure of the circle again—how is the spell activated and message contained?”

“Ansuz for recording the message, mannaz for the caster. Whatever for sounding the message, and mannaz for the receive.”

Notaro hummed. “Well, that’s all well and good, but you’re forgetting a step in that the circle also needs to hold the message in it.”

“Hold...?” Harry repeated, his mouth gaping open for a moment. Of course it needed to hold! This whole assignment had been on holding a message—but he’d been so focused on recording and listening—“I’m going to have to start completely over, aren’t I?”

“I thought we were done being dramatic, Mr. Harrigan. Actually, when you drew your version, I was surprised to hear your explanation of what you’d done, because if I were to give what you have to someone else to read it, they wouldn’t have quite the same reading on it. Beyond the lecture I’ve just given you on personal readings, of course.”

“They wouldn’t read it the same?”

“Spell casting basics, Mr. Harrigan. Break down the components of this spell for me.”
Harry frowned, thinking of Severus’s explanation of the dark arts not too long ago—but he quashed that thought and obliged the Professor. “There’s the people involved, which is the caster and the receiver. And there’s the message itself, which is the subject, I guess. And there’s the actions, which is recording the message, and playing back the message…”

“I’d argue that the message is part of the subject, and the spell circle itself is the other half, since it holds the message.”

“So then,” Harry said slowly. “If algiz is protection, it could hold the message—and ansuz could be both actions? I’d have to move the incantation triangle to balance—or should I duplicate it? And how would that be…”

Across the desk, Professor Notaro smiled and swirled the tea about in her mug. “I think I’ve given you more than enough assistance on this assignment, Mr. Harrigan,” she informed him lightly. “So it’s probably best you take some time to work through it on your own. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Harry blinked at her, the runes swimming in his head making it hard to think of anything but this hopeful solution—but he did have something to ask her about. What was it? Oh—elements—but he didn’t want to lose his current thread of thought, and pulled it into his occlumency, hoping that would help him find it again.

"Severus says that air is my element," he said after a moment. Notaro, apparently savoring her tea again, glanced over at him and nodded. "I want to try doing another ward, if I have the time. To see if the materials really make that much of a difference. But... How do you make air into a bead?"

“Ah. A common misconception. It’s not necessarily that you have to make air itself into your material, it’s that you need a material with an air affinity. There are several that correspond to each element—mica and pumice are common for air.”

“Mica… we use mica powder in…” He searched his memory, but couldn’t recall what potion he was thinking of. For once, however, it was the normal type of forgetting, the type where his mind was still trying to work out how he would compensate for algiz potentially disagreeing with mannaz, rather that the erased memories type.

“There are several potions that use it, and frankly, I couldn’t name a single one. Don’t tell Horace.” Professor Notaro winked at him over her tea cup. "But it might prove troublesome for you to acquire in the rather precise forms you should be using at this stage. And fine as your clay beads were, I don’t think you have quite the delicate touch for the sort of spells jewelers use for re-shaping those elements.”

Harry shook his head. Getting the clay beads to be perfectly round and the same size had been a nightmare. Pandora had enjoyed helping him with the craft project, but she already had a busier schedule than he did, and he didn’t want to trouble her when he wouldn’t be able to explain or share his revised null ward. “If possible, I’d prefer to buy the beads and focus more on the spell part of it.”

“Oh, well—that opens up your options, if you don’t mind paying for more than clay,” Notaro said, and she set down her tea cup. “Here,” she said, scratching something onto a spare piece of parchment with the quill she’d been using for marking before Harry came in and pushing it towards him. “A friend of mine runs a craft shop in Glasgow. Mostly deals with muggles, but she’s used to getting owls from my students searching for odd items. I’m afraid the next closest shop specialized for enchanting materials is in Cork, and that’s a bit far for an owl to travel.”

“Thanks,” he said, staring at the name without really processing it. “Er, does she prefer galleons, or
pounds?”

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever thought to ask.”

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Harry hurried out, thoughts of runes floating around his head, the paper with the name burning a hole in his pocket, and no time for worrying about anything else, such as where he was going. Perhaps that was how he managed to run straight into someone going around the corner, or maybe they ran into him—it didn’t matter either way, but he looked up from where he was sprawled on the floor with a scowl, still trying to keep hold of the thoughts Notaro had given them.

They vanished in an instant when he realized the face glaring back down at him belonged to Sirius Black. So, okay, the Gryffindor’s magical presence had been there, and it went to show how focused Harry had been that he’d somehow ignored the incoming danger and then walked into it. Harry jumped to his feet, backing off several paces, and tried to remember which pocket he’d stuck his wand in without being too obvious.

“What?”

“Don’t you have—”

But whatever it was Harry was supposed to have, he never found out, because another voice broke in. “Black,” said Hector, coming up behind Harry, his magic, for once, flickering with agitation. “You know, I can take points for inappropriate language.”

“I’m not in your house, Smithe,” Sirius guffawed, though the hand that had been holding his wand in the pocket of his robes emerged empty.

“Oh, right,” said Hector. “I mean, that’s pretty obvious; I don’t think you’d last a day in Ravenclaw. So I can’t take points—I can assign detention.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Sirius protested. “It’s not my fault if Harrigan doesn’t watch where he’s walking.”

“No, but it is if you stick around and verbally harass him afterwards.” Hector paused. “Take a hint, Black.”

Sirius’s scowl deepened for a moment, and then his face smoothed and he shrugged and started walking again. Harry pressed up into the wall to stay out of reach, pivoting pointedly to not let Sirius get behind his back. And in doing so, he ended up facing Hector.

The guilt of spilling his secret to Quora hadn’t healed yet, but Harry tried to swallow that down. It was difficult when Hector was giving him that intensely hurt look, like he did when Harry was absent for too many meals.

“Thanks,” Harry started, hoping he at least sounded nonchalant. “Black is a real piece of work.”

“Why weren’t you at the study group?”
Harry blinked. That… wasn’t what Harry had expected. “Oh, that was… sorry. I forgot.”

“And lunch? Did you forget that too?”

Harry considered protesting that he’d been in the kitchens, but then he remembered that he hadn’t had any appetite and skipped. Hector seemed to pluck that right off his face because he scowled and grabbed Harry by the arm. “Come on,” he said. “We’re going to dinner. Now.”

“Er,” said Harry, even as he was being pulled along. “I’d rather not… you know I don’t like the dinner crowd…” Not to mention, he wanted to get back to his homework before the spark of inspiration disappeared.

“You are not skipping both lunch and dinner. Don’t think I haven’t seen how overworked you’re getting.”

That was… reasonable, really. “Look,” said Harry. “We can—I’ll take you to the kitchens with me, if you want, but I’m not going to the Great Hall.”

Hector paused. “Alright,” he said after a minute. “Where are they?”

Harry led the way down to the kitchens. Hani wasn’t in when they arrived, but Moggy was happy enough to get Harry and Hector set up with dinner at the end of the replica of Ravenclaw’s table.

“This is where you spend so much time?” Hector said, looking around. “It’s… cozy.”

“Very,” Harry agreed. For a moment he hesitated to add anything more, but it wasn’t like the kitchens were something he needed to keep secret, so he pointed to the stool beside the fireplace. “I usually sit and read there. Hani makes the best tea, I swear.”

“Huh.” Hector looked down at the dishes Moggy had summoned for them, a full spread of the meal being served upstairs, enough for five people, at least. “And it… isn’t a bother for them to serve you down here?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t think so, but to be fair, they’d never tell me if it were. And it’s not like I’m the only one who knows about this being here, I’m just the most… habitual.”

“Habitual,” Hector echoed. “And… just…” He stopped, sighed, and crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t get it, Harry. Most people like eating in the Great Hall, especially for lunch, getting a good break in first thing out of classes…”

“I’ve told you before, haven’t I? I don’t like crowds. And… it’s harder to read up there, so it ends up being an hour wasted.”

“Talking to people isn’t wasting time. Regular socialization is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle.”

“That something your mum says?”

“I spend my summers studying muggle sciences,” Hector said. “Including psychology. I won’t deny that I’ve got something of a special interest, after…”

Harry gripped his fork a bit tighter, not wanting to think about Raj, about why he’d been avoiding Hector as much as he could…

“In any case, coming to the study group is a way to socialize productively, isn’t it?” Hector pressed. “If you ask for help…”
“I wasn’t entirely alone in the library. Regulus came to share my table. And I went and saw Professor Notaro, which was both socializing productively and asking for help, so just…”

“Just what?”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t? Don’t what? Worry about you? Try to make sure you’re not getting too caught up your work that you stop taking care of yourself?” Hector stabbed a carrot and jabbed it towards Harry. “I’ve only known you for a year, Harry, and even I can see—”

“Lecture me,” Harry cut him off, and suddenly the words were flowing. Not the ones that he’d spent the last week avoiding, but… “Don’t lecture me. I get that you worry, but, Merlin’s sake, Hector, I’m doing as best as I can. Maybe I’m not taking nine NEWT classes, but I’ve still got a lot on my plate, and I’m the one managing it. Look, I’m not your responsibility, and I really don’t like people who try to control my life. I know you’re not trying to be… overbearing, but really? A bit of trust that I can handle myself would be nice.”

Hector stared at him for several long moments before he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back from the table. “So you think that working yourself until you fall asleep outside of the dorm is ‘handling it’?”

Harry used his fork to turn over the vegetables he’d dished onto his plate one at a time. “Not my finest moment,” he admitted. “But I’m working on it. Trust me, Hector.”

The look on Hector’s face as he struggled to find words made Harry’s stomach flip. He wasn’t giving the whole truth, of course, or anything even close to it, but… he needed Hector to stop asking questions. To not look into this. Because if he looked to close and started to suspect something more was going on… then the lying would really begin, and he didn’t know which would be worse: Quora ‘dealing’ with it, or Quora making Harry deal with it.

No, he did know. The first. The first would be the threat that he used to push Harry into doing it himself, and it would no doubt end up with bad feelings on both sides, while Quora watched on with his sick amusement.

Hector finally picked up his fork again, and nodded slightly. “Alright,” he said. “Alright. Would… would you at least tell me what all you’re working on?”

Harry sighed, half in exasperation, half in relief. “Well, I’ve got two semesters worth of Runes work that I skipped over, so I’m trying to get caught up to the class there. And I’ve got an extra credit project for Flitwick, but I’ve got Severus to help with that—”

“Extra credit project?” Hector echoed.

“Something we talked about over the holidays. Chaining defensive wards, that sort of thing.”

“I didn’t know you needed extra credit. Your marks are always good.”

“I don’t; it’s just for fun.” He paused, but Hector only gave him a skeptical look. “And I’ve got some work out for the OMRL still. And then there’s work for Quora.”

“And that’s more than the load of an extra class, I’ll bet.”

Harry shrugged. “I mean, you’re taking nine NEWTs. Even with the extra work, it’s less time than your classes come out to.”
“We’re not talking about my schedule, Harry, we’re talking about yours. If it’s too much for you, you should cut something.”

“It’s not,” Harry said firmly. Hector looked like he was going to argue, but Harry just echoed what he’d already said. “I’m the only one who knows how much I can handle, and I say I can handle it. Trust me.”

“I’m trying to be helpful, I know a thing or two about handling a tight schedule—”

“I know, Hector, really.”

Hector sighed. “So if I ask you to come back to the tower to work on the homework for Defense, will that be too nagging?”

“That’s… sure,” said Harry. “I mean, that’s what I was planning to do, anyways.”

“Really?”

“Yes? I have a busy day tomorrow, I’ve got a lot to get done.”

“Oh, right, the staff meeting.”

“You’re know about that?”

“I am a sort-of prefect. And they review security stuff—you know, evacuation procedure. Which is why I’m a prefect, so that Ravenclaw’s not short.”

“Huh. Well, yeah, there’s that. And three classes, and two hours of helping with the third years.”

“Well, I can help with the homework part,” Hector said, his demeanor much improved. “You said you’re getting caught up on Runes still? I can help with that, you know, I’m not a prodigy like you are, but—”

“I’m not a prodigy,” Harry said. “And I’ve already gotten help from Professor Notaro. But—thanks, I mean. Lets just… if we’re going to work together, let’s keep it to the Defense homework, yeah?”

By the time they finished their homework, it was nearly midnight. With Notaro’s advice in mind, he managed to create a working version of the spell, and though it only played once, once was all it needed. And while Quora assigned a lot of homework, it was straightforward enough, and between him and Hector they were able to get it done in only a few hours.

What took the longest was the Charms homework. It was open-ended, but Flitwick had a keen sense of who could manage what level of the spell, and Harry did not want to worsen the Professor’s concern over his workload. Luckily, free from the overload of magic in Flitwick’s classroom Harry was able to get the spell fairly quickly, it was simply a matter of thinking of and perfecting an illusion that would earn him full credit. It was difficult in part because of the obfuscus—every time he thought of something he knew well enough to make a convincing image of it, he’d get a terrible headache.

In the end, he tried not to think at all as he conjured the image of a golden snitch, producing
something akin to an abstract painting in gold that flitted back and forth over the table they had taken over in the corner. Pandora saw him frowning as he worked on it and waved over an upperclassman he recognized but had never talked to—the seeker of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, Pandora told him as the girl hurried upstairs. She came back a few minutes later with a golden ball in hand. A practice snitch for training reflexes, she told him, and let go, demonstrating how it would only fly a few feet away from whoever released it. She snatched it up out of the air again, and passed it to Harry, who traced the familiar ridges on the gold surface.

“Do you play seeker, then?” she asked. “I’m graduating this year, after all, and I haven’t found anyone to train up for the position…”

“Oh, I haven’t played in years,” Harry said quickly. It wasn’t even really a lie: he’d been here a year and a half, touching three calendar years. Before that, he had no clue. Had he played for his house team, in the future? Best not go there. It was a headache waiting to happen. “I haven’t even got a broom.”

“Well, if you change your mind, you can use a school broom to try out,” she encouraged him, and gestured towards the practice snitch. “You can borrow that for a while, play around with it. Maybe it’ll get you interested again, hm?”

Harry smiled and nodded, thanking her, but there was no way he was going to play on a school team. Too many eyes on him… and it’d take the seat from someone else. That would be a quick way to alter the world enough to destroy his chances of getting home.

With the practice snitch, the illusion was much easier. He had something to reference that wasn’t a blocked memory, so he didn’t get headaches while picturing what he was trying to cast. What was more difficult was getting the motion accurate, since snitches moved so quickly you didn’t generally have time to think about the way it was happening. Eventually, however, he managed to match the flitting patterns of the practice snitch well enough Hector couldn’t tell them apart. With a bit more work, he was able to extend it out, and using some of the more energetic second years he worked on directing it around so that when they got close to grabbing it it would dart the other direction. The Head Boy eventually put a stop to that, but only because it was well past curfew for the younger students, and if they were going to be up it had better be to get work done, not to chase a snitch around the common room.

Hector created a record player, complete with ABBA. “So maybe I’m trying to set up for purebloods humming ‘Momma Mia’ when it gets stuck in their heads,” he admitted. “Dad really likes muggle music… I couldn’t escape it all summer. I used it to test my runes work too.”

It definitely got stuck in Harry’s head, and he was trying not to hum it when he woke up for a shower the next morning. Once classes began, however, it was the last thing on his mind. Notaro set them onto the task of making reversal circles, something that she said ‘might be something of a challenge for everyone’, which Harry just knew meant he was going to be hopelessly lost. Quora pulled a pop quiz on them, which Harry almost managed to focus on long enough to answer half of the questions for, and then wore everyone out by turning the classroom into a scenario where half the class was defending and the other half trying to ‘capture’ the room. And after lunch, there were third years to manage. They were dealing with a hinkypunk, and Quora had managed to secure one which was extra enthusiastic about setting the classroom on fire, which meant Harry had no time to spare to remember what had happened the previous Saturday. By the time Harry got to Charms, his robes were soggy from summoning water and he smelled faintly of smoke.

On the up side, he was too tired to pay much attention to the magic the illusions set free into the room. When it was his turn, he found it satisfying to tease his classmates with it, especially James,
who still occasionally brought out the stolen snitch he’d been messing around with down at the lake last June before the incident with Severus had erupted into chaos. For the most part, then, the illusion was a success, but Flitwick pointed out how Harry had made it difficult for himself, because with all the varying light sources in the room and the snitch being so reflective, it was obvious that the image was not real.

He still got full marks, though, when he caught it and gave it to Flitwick, demonstrating that the tactile qualities were accurate. That had been easy: of all his impressions of what a snitch was, the feeling of it in his hand was the most familiar.

At least if he’d been a Quidditch obsessed seeker in the nineties, he knew he’d been a decent one.

When the bell rang, he found himself dragging his feet to the Defense classroom for the third time that day. Quora met him outside, waved his wand to send Harry’s bag to his office, and directed them off towards the teacher’s lounge.

“What am I expected to do, in the meeting?” Harry mustered his courage to ask as they walked. Anything to appear like he wasn’t forcing himself not to run the other way. “I don’t have to… say anything, do I?”

“Unless someone asks you a question, it would probably be best if you did not,” Quora said dryly. “Assuming you value your image, at least. You do have a tendency to—what is the phrase? Put your foot in your mouth.”

Harry eyed the man carefully. There was something… off, about him. A spring in his step, almost, which, considering who the man was, was probably a worse sign than it was a good one. “You seem awfully cheerful, sir.”

“Do I? It is Friday.”

“Right.”

“Which means tomorrow is Saturday.”

Which meant… Harry felt bile rising in his throat and swallowed it down. “…funny how that works.”

Quora chuckled, but they were at the door to the staff room, and he waved Harry inside without elaborating. That meant that as Harry followed him around the tables arranged in a ring to seats across the room, ducking his head as he heard the handful of professors already gathered greeting Quora, he was left with a sinking feeling in his gut. Saturday. That meant another session of grading essays followed by a… could Harry call it anything other than interrogation? Torture session? Demonstration of why Harry would never have an ounce of sympathy for Quora’s agenda?

Quora sat in the very back and center, opposite the door, and gestured Harry to take the seat next to him. He met Harry’s eyes for the briefest moment—

But there was no warning in them. Only amusement. Harry could practically feel it radiating off the man as Harry pulled the chair back from the table and sat down, intentionally putting a few more inches of space between them as he readjusted—

But it wasn’t enough. Quora’s magic was restrained, but it wasn’t enough. He was right there—

Slughorn was the next in through the doors, being trailed by a posse of Slytherin prefects, and he seemed delighted to spot Harry. “Mr Harrigan,” he said as he eagerly rushed to claim the seat at Harry’s side. The prefects—he recognized Michael and Primrose Greengrass, twins from his year,
and Regulus, who brightened up at seeing Harry—filled in the corner to Slughorn’s left. “Looks like you’ve settled into your new position, hm?”

“He is acceptable, thus far,” Quora drawled. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see his hands come to rest on the table, and he tapped it twice with his fingers. Not five seconds later, a mug of tea appeared in a blink of elf-magic. “If you discount his insistence on giving second chances where they are not earned, but that comes out of his own time, of course.”

“Second chances?” Slughorn looked puzzled, calling for tea for himself—and Harry. Across the room, the other prefects were coming in, herded by Sprout and McGonagall. Hector looked disappointed by Harry’s seat, between the two Professors, and ended up sitting between Cat and Lily.

“How did you phrase it, Mr. Harrigan? That wizards are stuck in—oh, medieval times with our quills, so of course the muggleborns don’t know how to write worth a damn.”

Harry’s ears were burning.

“Well, it’s a valid point,” someone said thoughtfully. Harry looked up to find—a professor, he didn’t know her name, sitting around the corner of the table ring, on the other side of the Slytherin students, though there was a notable gap between her and Michael Greengrass, a mug of tea in hand, fogging up her gold-framed oval spectacles. “Muggles have long since moved on. For children raised to use pens and pencils, quills seem like an unnecessarily bothersome change.”

“Regardless, we are not muggles,” Quora said. “And while Mr. Harrigan here may do as he likes with his free time, I find it tiresome to try and encourage those who do not wish to learn even as simple a thing as proper penmanship.”

“It’s hardly their fault,” the professor replied.

“Well, Professor Savant, if you would like to volunteer the time for teaching them, I’m sure the rest of us would appreciate it.”

Savant! That was her name. She taught… not arithmancy; that was Vector. Art? Muggle Studies? The latter, most likely.

The… Muggle Studies Professor, who was eyeing the man seated beside Harry darkly without a clue as to who he was.

“Unfortunately,” she said, enunciating it with long vowels, “Seeing my subject, I generally do not come in contact with many of the muggleborns who come to Hogwarts. And when I do, they’ve already reached their third year, and by then… Of course,” she went on, “every few years the suggestion of a new class for incoming muggleborns is brought before the Board of Governors, and every single time they mention that there simply aren’t the resources.”

“Well, yes,” Quora said. “If you are going to allocate limited funds towards a new project, then I imagine that it would be a project that benefits the majority of students.”

“If it would help muggleborns join our world more smoothly, then it would benefit the majority of students.”

“Indirectly. But as I understand it, there is plenty of argument from the, ah, other side as well, that forcing the poor muggleborns to assimilate is just too much. That we should let them choose which aspects they wish to learn—never mind that some things are essential. In which case it is simpler—and more effective—to let them seek out knowledge”
Beside Harry, Slughorn shifted in his seat, laughing in a painfully fake way. “Yes, it is always good
to encourage the students to seek knowledge on their own, isn’t it? And how wonderful that we have
students like Mr. Harrigan here to step up as Assistants and help their peers out! Good lad… we
could do with more of them, don’t you think?”

Savant glanced Harry’s way, but she did not take the obvious out from the conversation Slughorn
was trying to provide, setting down her tea instead. “It is not the responsibility of the students to
educate each other,” she said. “We, the Professors, are the educators—Mr. Harrigan aside. And as
the students live here, we are their parental figures as well. It’s our job, and our duty, as magicals, to
extend a hand.”

“Well, make your case to the Governors, darling, and perhaps you’ll sway their opinion,” Quora
said, and the way he said it was so awful Harry just wanted to melt into his seat. Or at least fall into
one of the other conversations still going on the other side of the room, though they were starting to
attract glances. “Myself, I don’t see the point. If they need coddling, they aren’t worth the trouble.”

“Coddling?” Savant echoed, disbelief written on her face. She glanced around, as though searching
for someone to share in this ridiculousness with, but when she met Harry’s eyes he could only give
her a pained look.

Quora was right there. Right there and so—bloody—

“How is it coddling, to teach children what they need to know in order to survive?” Savant
demanded. “You can’t just expect them to be thrown into a new world and come knowing a whole
new set of life skills they’ve had no experience with!”

“Well of course no one expects that,” Quora said easily, taking a sip of his tea.

“You referred to Mr. Harrigan’s offer to teach them worthless!”

“I called it tiresome, I believe. Though worthless might be a better term, because he is the one
offering. If they don’t seek to improve on their own, they will never amount to anything worthwhile,
or contribute anything of value to our society.” He set the tea down, and Harry nearly jumped at the
sound.

“Really?” Savant said. “That’s—that’s ridiculous. You’re saying that children who start out at a
disadvantage aren’t worth the effort to overcome that disadvantage.”

“Not if it takes away from a limited pool of resources that could be used to benefit others,” Quora
said. “That goes for magical children as well, but magical children, of course, have the added benefit
of magical parents, who can instill the values of our society from a young age, and do not sap the
system to a disproportionate degree.”

“You’re saying,” Savant said slowly, lowly, “That no matter the potential of a child—never mind
that every child has value just by existing—that no matter the potential we should not foster it, that it
is impossible that what they can contribute will outweigh the costs.” She seemed to be trying very
hard not to spit at him. “I can understand why you were not a Professor here before this moment of
desperation.”

“I’m not saying it is impossible, I am saying it is so thoroughly unlikely that if we are going to look at
things from an economical standpoint, there are better investments,” Quora said. “Although I’m
unsure how we ended up here, Professor.”

“We ended up here because you made a comment that—that embodies the short-sighted, illogical,
downright bigoted policies encouraged by blood purists!”

Quora hummed. “Well,” he said. “If your reaction to something you cannot understand is to call it bigoted, then I see how you have become so frustrated.”

“You can’t mean to tell me you don’t see purism as bigotry,” she said. “It is right there in the name. The assumption that pure blood is better—”

“I think we’ve gotten off course,” Quora interrupted, and though Savant tried to carry on, he talked right over her, and she, at least, was polite enough to listen. “But no. What you call blood purism, I call practicality, Miss. Economic and cultural conservatism. The, shall we call them, fresh blood types that have been charging into the political and journalistic spheres of late shouting loudly, but they do not represent the interests of the majority. And as they so often insist on going about things outside the normal function of our legal system… If they really believe that they can make meaningful impacts, then they can stop raising a fuss about it and get down to business, can’t they?”

“You think people should not voice their beliefs?”

“I think that if the way you go about voicing your beliefs takes up time that could be used bettering society, like the Libs with their excessive reliance on filibustering—not to mention the ‘social demonstrations’ in Diagon, of late—then you are only wasting time and resources. And that’s before we get into the excessive idealism of their politics, not at all grounded in reality.”

“And the so-called Death Eaters?” Savant said coolly. A hush fell over the room as the last few people trying to carry on their conversations caught her words. The prefects in the room looked especially nervous. "The bloody terrorists advocating your—your absolutely tasteless beliefs?"

“Ah, yes. Them.” Quora lifted his tea again, but did not drink. “Well, of course I don’t believe that acts of terrorism are the best way to express your politics, and certainly I don’t condone violence, but when we get down to it, the politics themselves… Historically speaking, they are not so unusual. They just make sense.”

“So you’re saying that a good thirty of our students ought to be killed for, you know, breathing.”

“Are we talking politics?” Quora asked, with no shortage of irony. “I don’t want to talk politics if it’s going to have us at each other’s throats.” Quora glanced around as if imploring the other teachers. They were, for the most past, tight-lipped.

“As the—the Dark Bastard is at the throats of hundreds, no, thousands of witches and wizards for simply existing?” Savant snarled.

“We’re talking politics, Tim,” Slughorn said warily. Quora gave a shrug, as though disinterested and only reluctantly forced to reveal his hand.

“It’s a matter of priorities and preservation, I am afraid,” Quora explained. “If your priority is to adopt as many of those blessed with magic into our own way of life, I cannot fault you for that. If, however, that road involves blurring our cultures together until they no longer exist, then I am afraid we will have to agree to disagree. I have had the privilege of travelling a great deal with several worthy companions, and in my time crossing the world have seen the relics of cultures lost to the world, or on the brink of Death. Here—”

“Change is good, and inevitable!” Savant exclaimed.

“Change is good, I agree. The loss of our way of life in a preventable manner is not. Change without ridicule of those who celebrate our culture, without destruction of self to pander to the discomfort of
those who are essentially aliens accepted with open arms because they cannot handle a bit of culture shock is not.”

Savant spluttered. Harry, were it at all wise to speak his opinions on politics in his increasingly difficult situation, would be shouting by now, if only to remind the muggle studies Professor that she had a point to be made, and that this smug bastard’s infuriatingly calm exterior was not worth the distress it was causing her. By the time her processing had caught up with her indignation, however, Quora was there to put her off again.

“Come, Miss Savant, surely you should understand better than the rest of us? You do teach Muggle Studies, after all, and what use will your class be when we’ve fallen too far into Muggle culture to recognize ourselves? And you are a Hindu, your own parents, as you have told me, diplomats from India, a nation whose culture has been none too quietly trampled on by our own British interests, who would have your men in suits and your women in saris only at the vacation villages built over the top of temples. Mahatma Gandhi, like so many others, would not see India lost to the British Empire. Nor should we see Wizarding Britain lost to the muggle world.”

“This—this is not colonialism! How dare you—”

“It is not? Surely magical humans are the more powerful aspect of the species, but we lose to muggles in sheer numbers. Oh, and when they drop bombs on our villages.” He fixed her with a long, sideways look, taking a sip of tea while she spluttered. “Certainly, change and progress are inevitable and, for the most part, welcome things. Achieving them without destruction, on the other hand, is our task of Atlas, but well worth the struggle.”

“Tell that to your Lord Voldemort,” Savant spat.

In that moment, the air was so still they could hear the sounds of the kitchen, to thick walls and a hallway away. Quora just leaned back his his seat, rolling his mug back and forth between his hands. “He is not my Lord, nor any Lord, as far as I know,” he said, cool as ever. Harry could have laughed at that line—his own, practically stolen from his first letter to the bastard—but he could hardly breath for fear. Quora was undercover now, but if he revealed himself… Harry had a feeling Savant would be among the first to know, and the first to suffer, after, perhaps, Dumbledore, who had just appeared in the doorway and who Quora now turned his attention to. “As I said, it would be tasteless to support, as you put it, a terrorist.”

“As an excellent point, Professor Quora, despite everything. And please, Professor Savant,” said Dumbledore suddenly, sweeping into the room and cutting her off before she could respond. “You are all aware of my politics, and I find Professor Quora’s mindset as faulty as any of you do. But alas, this staff meeting is neither the time nor the place for this discussion. Shall we get started?”

The room visibly relaxed, though it took some coercing on Dumbledore’s part to restore what Harry could now see was a tentative balance. Across the room, Lily was looking pale, and Hector gripping his armrest so tightly his knuckles were turning white, but they didn’t say anything—not them, not anyone else.

As he settled back into his chair, Harry found himself growing more and more disappointed in the other teachers for not speaking up to support the flustered Muggles Studies professor, to point out the obvious flaws and inaccuracies in Quora’s logic. Granted, he had never heard any of them speak on politics before, except McGonagall and Flitwick—and that was only the once, when they’d been arguing over his right to go to the Halloween rally, so long ago. Even Slughorn, for all his varied connections in the political world, did not speak openly.

Then again, he hadn’t said anything himself. Even Dumbledore preferred to cut the conversation short
rather than argue it out. So in the end, it was only Quora who had been heard.

The meeting came to a close before Harry could will himself to pay attention, and Quora waved Harry out. Their walk was a short one, luckily, made in complete silence, one that ended with a staircase that Harry had to about occlude himself out of existence to follow Quora up, but when the office door shut and Harry saw Quora’s self-satisfied expression, he couldn’t help but snort. And then regret it, quickly, and glance back toward Quora’s face, expecting anger, or—or something, but not the faint smile on his lips.

“Do tell what has you so amused, Mr. Harrigan.”

“You don’t condone violence?” he said tentatively. It had seemed funny, a moment ago.

“Of course not,” he said, voice droll. “I am a teacher, after all.”

“Right,” Harry scoffed. “You’re also the one who wants to *crucio* third years.”

“Fourth years. And it is not that I want to, tempting though it may be on any given day… It’s simply the most effective means of teaching the subject matter. It is how you learned, is it not?”

He said it casually, but Harry stilled. “I never had a teacher gone enough to use *crucio* on me, before,” he said lowly. He assumed that was true. He had his vague memories of fighting *imperio*, but *crucio* ——there was only one memory of that, tied up in the same burst that gave him the scar on his arm, and he at least hoped that hadn’t been a teacher.

“It was the Imperius I was referring to, Mr. Harrigan. Or was your throwing it off—a spell cast by a Dark Lord while you were already under significant distress—merely a fluke?”

He went around the desk, waving a hand at the extra chairs—situated as they had been at office hours, paired to one side of the door and in front of the bookcases—so that one of them rose up through the air and settled itself in front of the desk. Harry sat in it warily, hands folded in his lap, touching at little of the wood as he could manage.

“Well?”

“I can neither confirm or deny your assumptions,” Harry said stiffly.

“Then I shall assume that I am correct. I usually am.” Quora waved his wand towards one of the shelves, summoning a decanter to his desk, which he unstopped to pour the amber liquid inside into the accompanying glass. He settled back into his chair with it, looking for all the world with his balding head and pinstriped grey robes like the villain of a political drama BBC show that would be pulled off the air halfway through the season to be replaced with reruns. “I am curious as to who this friend of Dumbledore is, who would be so familiar with the Dark Arts as to teach you with that method. A friend who is apparently living outside of the Ministry’s control.”

He looked at Harry pointedly, but what did he expect? They already had the fiction of the ‘gaes’ between them to account for Harry’s inability to give any real information about his past. “There’s not much I can say,” Harry said, suddenly feeling very tired. There were too many layers to this to
deal with, but with Quora, it wasn’t a matter of what he wanted. It was what Quora was going to take—and when he ripped the information from Harry, only to find that there was nothing there…

“I’m sure you can think of something.”

Harry buried his sigh and tried to conjure up a worthwhile answer. He needed to say something. It would require some level of truth to it—Quora had made his point about lying to a legilimens, and Harry didn’t have enough energy to occlude well enough to hide an outright lie. He remembered being held under the _imperius_ over and over again, but not who had done it, and thinking about it too hard made his head hurt, with all the blank spots in the memories. Assuming it was a teacher didn’t change much; he could hardly remember any of those, either. It wasn’t likely to have been McGonagall, though it was only logical that she had been the head of Gryffindor in his time, based on how he had acted when at their ‘first’ meeting. And it was laughable to think of Dumbledore doing that… So it would have been one of the other Professors…

He stopped thinking altogether when a sharp crack of pain lanced through his forehead—he’d pushed too far towards the memories he’d sealed off. He must of made some sound, because when it had receded enough for him to recover his bearings and he glanced up to Quora, the man had his eyebrows raised.

“So if you even consider breaking the gaes, it punishes you,” he mused. It took Harry a moment to understand, and then he could do little more than shrug, which for whatever reason made Quora’s mouth twitch into what would be a smile if his eyes weren’t narrowed. “I would very much like to meet the man who cast that.”

“...well, if I could pass that on, I would,” Harry said. Technically, it wasn’t even a lie: he was the one who had cast the memory charm, which was what Quora was unwittingly referring to. As Harry was one person, he could not ‘pass’ any information, but if there were an instance where he was able to warn an oblivious version of himself of Quora’s interest, he would.

Quora frowned. “You’ve no way of contacting him?”

“It’s… complicated?” Harry said, and then winced again at how pathetic he sounded. Well, let Quora think it was pain.

“Apparently,” Quora said. “And from the looks of it, you are in no condition to think your way around it, even if you wanted to.”

Condition? “Sir?”

“Sleep, Mr. Harrigan, is for the average human something that should be done regularly. For the growing teenager, it should fill around nine hours a night. I expect that when you come in tomorrow afternoon you will have suitably remedied your fatigue.”

Any other professor, and concern about how much sleep Harry was or was not getting would be reasonable. But even such an innocuous question was... “...Yes, sir.”

For whatever reason, that made Quora sigh. “And I do suggest you prepare yourself. We wouldn’t want a repeat of last week, would we? It is not a difficult task I have assigned you. We will be discussing Miss Pandora Moone. I’m sure you will have _something_ to tell me.”

Harry swallowed, looking down at his hands, tightening them into fists to stop the shaking. Of course not, but… was he really prepared to… He had given Hector’s secrets, and he couldn’t stand to face him, after that. But Pandora, she had told him to defy _him_ in her name… so was it better for
him to try the route of stubbornness to protect her against her wishes, or to follow her plan when he feared Quora would not take it well?

A spot of gold flickered across his hands, and he looked up to see Quora holding his glass up to catch the last light coming through the window, swirling it about as though he weren’t threatening to torture Harry. What did it matter what Harry did, in the face of arrogance like that? A defiant blow was as much damage as he could hope to do. Even if it were nothing more than an annoyance—it would be worth it, just to return some of the negativity to the man. He took a deep breath.

“Actually, sir… Pandora gave me a message for you.”

The glass stilled, and all the air seemed to suck out of the room as Quora turned his eyes towards Harry. “A message for me.”

Okay, perhaps this wasn’t the best decision. “Y… yes, sir.”

Quora set the glass down on the desk with enough force to shake the table, and turned to face Harry fully. “And who, exactly, does she intend the message for?”

“She’s… she’s not entirely certain, sir, but—”

“What exactly did you tell her?”

“Nothing!” Harry said quickly. He could feel the edges of Quora’s magic beginning to ripple. This was a really bad idea. “She just… I…”

“It will not only be you who faces pain for your—”

“No! No, I—she’s—she’s a seer!” The words were coming out almost as quickly as Harry’s heart was beating. “She knew what was going to happen, but she can’t… She said something blocks her from seeing you. She doesn’t know who you are—or that you’re the, uh—you. But she knew you were going to want information about her, so she…” He swallowed. “She gave me a message for you.”

Quora continued to stare at him, while Harry looked anywhere else but the man’s face and tried to reinforce his occlumency. It was difficult, with the threat of his magic getting loose—somehow that was more terrifying to Harry than the thought of being held under crucio again. But when he spoke, his voice had retreated to a monotone.

“A seer.”

“Yes. That’s—yes.”

Quora picked up the glass, looked at it without any of the vague intrigue he’d displayed holding it to the light a minute before, and set it down again. He might have thrown it, were he someone else. “And what is this message.”

After that outburst, Harry was questioning whether repeating what she had told him to say was really a good idea. Of course, he knew the answer: most definitely not. But he’d already made the decision, hadn’t he; and in for a knut, out for a galleon…

Still, he wasn’t entirely witless.

“I’m going to quote,” he said. “Her words, not mine.”
“Such loyalty you show your friends.”

“She’d be insulted if I changed them, but I’m the one who is here to say them.”

Quora’s lips thinned. “I am growing impatient, Mr. Harrigan.”

“She says…” He licked his lips, mouth feeling paper dry. He had reviewed her words in the week since she had spoken them, well enough to know them by heart, because he understood that this was a delicate matter. She wouldn’t have told Harry to show Quora the memory, if it weren’t, and he wasn’t going to that, so he needed to be certain.

“She says that she is a seer, that she prefers the company of elves to humans, and…” He glanced to Quora’s face—impassive, still. “That her sight would only, um, build you self-fulfilling prophecies that would… tear you apart. And that you should remember what you’ve done to the Fawleys, because if you try to, um, claim her, she could take the family seat. And if she did, as a seer on the Wizengamot she could get more power through blackmail than…”

“Than?”

Harry dug his nails into his palms, bracing himself. He’d had to look up the word she’d used, and whoever it referred to—not there was anything wrong with it, but Quora was going to take offense, he knew it. “Than you or your inamorato could ever hope to gain.”

If Quora had been a more expressive man, it might have been easier for Harry to bear the space that followed, because there would have some sign. As it was… even his magic was still, drawn back into his rigid body. Harry did his best not to fidget, for his part, tried not to fixate on every tiny fluctuation, tried to occlude against everything, because his own thoughts were churning…

If Quora went for Pandora, now, would Harry be able to stand in his way?

“Get out, Mr. Harrigan.”

If only he had been given that order before he’d delivered Pandora’s message, he would have followed it immediately. But now he could not, not without knowing… “Do you have an answer for her?”

“So brave,” Quora sneered. “She is a Ravenclaw, is she not? It should be well within her abilities to see that you are alive after daring to carry that message and extrapolate from there. Or would you prefer something more overt? For a message in words, I need only need leave your tongue. Everything else…”

Harry swallowed, but held his ground. “I doubt I can even tell her that I delivered her message, with the… gaes, without you allowing it. So If you’re going to allow that, then I might as well give her a complete answer. But I’m not stupid enough to try and put words in your mouth, so…”

“No, you only carry quotes. Tell me, does it make you feel safe, to not have to speak for yourself? Do you pretend you bear no responsibility for the words you carry?”

“I feel safe in knowing that I have not made things worse, when I have a direct message to carry. Life is uncertain enough without trying to play a guessing game with messages from a Dark Lord in disguise.”

Quora’s steely grey eyes narrowed further. “Then you may tell your friend that if I care to give her a more direct message, I will do so. Until then, I suppose she will have to depend on her Sight to guide her. But with that, she should know exactly what will happen if she repeats what she has tried to
pull. Now. *Get out.*”

Chapter End Notes

Late again, but this time only by a day - forgot I had "another 500 words to write to wrap this up" which was actually closer to 1,500 words. (...and it could have been a week again. so there is that.)

This is probably one of the nerdiest chapters I've written in a while. Do you feel like you've delved too deep into fictional academia and politics? So do I, friends, so do I.

Also, writing the staff room argument was one of the more painful things I've done recently, but in fact, I do wish I could push it a bit further with how irritating Quora is. And also that I could give Savant a hug, for showing up solely for the purpose of experiencing one of the more frustrating experiences in life.

Happy July! We've made it halfway through the year already. Yikes. Also, according to my tracking document, I've written... 158,000 words thus far this year. Which simultaneously seems like a lot, and not very much at all... considering that I was just shy of 550k total last year. Gonna have to step up my game!

(Not really; things are going to get a lot more difficult following this month, and I'm happy that I've been able to maintain things as well as I have so far. Luckily for this story I've only got three chapters left to finish... just gotta buckle down and get them done.)

Edit: OH HEY we passed 300k. Butterbeers all around!

Edit 2: for those worried - yes, the story still has 12 chapters left! not just 3. I've already written the first drafts for 9 of them, and have 3 left to finish.
Harry sighed, looking up from the book on warding and turning his gaze skyward. Patience, it seemed, was escaping him.

A general grey had claimed the skies since the month began, reflecting bright off the heavy drifts of snow still layered over the grounds, the branches of the Forbidden Forest a dark line between earth and sky. In every classroom, the fires were lit, but Harry, curled up in without his cloak in the window of the study room, watched his breath freeze the moment it came in contact with the glass. He paused, taking a moment to draw a triangle with the runes for a simple heating spell, and watched the fogging melt away, ending the spell as quickly as it had begun.

He tried once more to turn back to his book, but when he looked down at the page, he hadn't a clue where he had stopped, so he folded it shut and tucked it away into his bag. Standing, he stretched, his limbs stiff from too many hours reading and too few asleep, and glanced around the room as though the castle would give him answers.

Hogwarts was silent. Typical.

Harry shook his head, hoisted the strap of his bag up over his shoulder, and set off. It was Wednesday, so as soon as classes were over he was stuck helping Quora with office hours. He had helped a pair of second years memorizing anti-jinx categories the week before, but beyond that so far Harry had only used the hours for doing his own homework while Quora dealt with the upperclassmen. He didn't think he would mind having students to help today, though. It would take his mind off of things.

Things with Quora had been... tentatively peaceful. Since had delivered Pandora's message, he had managed to avoid a repeat of the torture session that the previous Saturday had become. In classes, Quora treated him no differently from any other student, to Harry's immense relief, and for the better part of the classes he was assisting with, he sat off out of the way until it was time to help supervise the practical aspects of the lesson. In truth, he didn't even really mind the teaching. The kids listened to him well enough, and since he was a Ravenclaw it didn't matter what house they came from like it might have if a Gryffindor or Slytherin had been the TA: they respected his opinions without any petty rivalries coming into play. And he had seen his fair share of that. Ever since the fight he'd put a stop to in the hall, what seemed like a lifetime ago, the Gryffindors and the Slytherins had all been ready to spring into action at the first sign that someone else was going for it.

But Harry could not—and would not—forget who and what Quora was. In a way, it was comforting to know that Harry was able to be there, observing, watching with his own eyes to catch the man in any horrid acts… not that he would be able to do anything but throw himself in front of the younger students if anything did happen. Aside from his penchant for assigning homework, however, Quora seemed to be limiting his wrongdoings to his time alone with Harry. He couldn't exactly say it was a
good thing, but it was better than the alternative.

Harry sighed as he approached the defense classroom, drawing out his wand to check the time. There was still a good fifteen minutes left in the period, and Quora never let his students leave more than five minutes early. He could sense the class at work inside, spells flying across the room. It was the second years, if Harry was remembering correctly, so he couldn't exactly blame Quora for having his wand in hand; practicals with the younger kids were a lesson in patience and an exercise for a teacher’s reflexes if there ever had been one. But it still made Harry nervous, sensing him, that wood in hand. Enough so that even though he was early, he slipped into the back of the classroom, leaning up against the wall by the door. Quora shot him a glance, but then he was caught up in returning a wand that had zoomed past him towards the front of the room. The kids were learning *expelliarmus*, apparently, and while it was a rare occurrence that they actually hit each other, each time they did a wand went flying in a different direction.

After a few minutes, Harry couldn't stand watching them any longer: he had to help. There was only so many times Quora would correct wand motion or pronunciation before he dismissed failure to understand as unconquerable incompetence, but Harry could literally feel each student's magic and potential to get the spell right every time they tried to cast. He doubted Quora would care if he stepped in to assist; if anything the Professor would rib him for it later and pretend it was some sign that Harry was bending to his master plan, or whatever it was he was trying to do. In the meantime, a few second years would benefit—and—oh, not that much—Harry winced as the tiny Hufflepuff girl near the middle overpowered her casting and threw the spell with such force that the boy she was partnered with was blasted backwards into the desks, landing awkwardly on his wrist. Quora was over to him in a heartbeat, but not before the boy gave a pitiful moan, starting some complaint about how his arm was ruined—and cut off by a yelp as Quora snatched it up off the floor at prodded it with his fingers. Harry winced at the mottling of colors, not envying the boy; he'd broken his wrist before, and it—he had broken his wrist before, hadn't he?

Harry pursed his lips. He couldn't remember... and he really did not need a headache right now...

"Mr. Harrigan," Quora called, bringing Harry back out of his thoughts as he beckoned him forward. When he lifted his wand, Harry was glad when the spell it produced was just to wrap bandages around the injured wrist, but he couldn't help wonder why he didn't fix it entirely. Was that outside of "Quora's" skill set? "Mr. Lockhart here has injured his wrist. As you are here early, if you would be so kind as to escort him to the Hospital Wing..."

Harry nodded and reached down to offer the boy a hand. He was blond, with a fortunate face arranged into a picture of perfect woe as he lifted himself up, giving his classmates a tragic expression of hurt. For the most part, they ignored him, except for the Hufflepuff girl who had thrown him back so forcefully. *She* looked particularly triumphant, lips curled up in satisfaction that she did not even try to conceal. Lockhart, in his woe, did not seem to notice.

Once Lockhart had collected his bag—Harry offered to carry it, though he was unsure if the boy was truly injured, with the way he was acting—they took the main staircases, pausing only to wait for one to swing around and pick them up. As soon as they were out the door, however, the boy began to speak.

"You're Dudley Harrigan," he began.

"Uh, yeah," Harry agreed. "Harry, though. That's what I go by. You're a Ravenclaw too, right?"

"Of course," the boy said, sniffing. "I don't think we have ever spoken, so I suppose I should introduce myself. Gilderoy Lockhart, if you weren't already aware."
"Er, right," said Harry. He didn't think 'Lockhart' was a pureblood name, so he wasn't sure why the boy was acting like he was part of that snobby lot, but what did Harry know about how twelve-year-olds acted anymore? He could barely remember what it was like to be twelve. Even that summer was hazier than the rest—and there was his headache, back again. Maybe he could talk Pompfrey into giving him a headache potion without her trying to confine him to a bed...

"I'm afraid that you will have to carry the news back to the house for me," the boy went on. "I am aware that this may be a heavy burden for someone as... awkward as yourself to bear, but you will tell them for me, won't you? I couldn't bear leaving everyone in the dark."

"In the dark about what?" Harry asked.

"That I am going to have to have my arm amputated," Lockhart said solemnly.

Harry raised an eyebrow. Aside from the occasional curse damage that couldn't be undone, it was rare that wizards ever had to go without all of their limbs. "I don't think you'll have to have an amputation—"

"Of course I will. The bone is entirely shattered; did you not see how horrible it looks? The fragments are digging into the surrounding muscle as we speak, tearing it apart. Every step we take is jostling it and furthering the destruction. By the time we reach the hospital wing, it will be too late."

Harry coughed. Something about the way the kid spoke was making his headache worse. His magic was rather faint, even for a second-year, so it had to be his voice causing the problem. "Right, well… you really don’t have to worry about that. Even if it is shattered, Pompfrey could always vanish the bones and regrow them. But I doubt she’ll have to, or Professor Quora would have taken you himself."

"Regrow them?" Lockhart asked. For a moment, his tragic expression broke to let earnest curiosity show through, but then a careless step had his injured arm bumping against his hip and he blanched, cradling it to his chest. "Well, that won’t be so bad, then. I don’t know anyone who has had a limb regrown before."

"A bone, not a limb. And I have. It’s wicked painful, so you’d better hope Madam Pompfrey can fix you up without it."

"You have? What happened?"

Harry frowned. Well, he’d thought he’d broken his wrist before, but now that he thought about it more he remembered the Skele-Gro, with its unbearable taste and eye-watering smoke, and the slow burn of bones growing in his disturbingly floppy arm… but that small section was alone in his memories, isolated from what happened before and after, and removed from the context of location or date. "Vanished half the bones in my arm on accident," he said shortly. "Not a pleasant experience. It works extremely slowly, too."

Lockhart frowned. "Well, were you at least doing something interesting when it happened?" he demanded.

"Homework," Harry invented. "Come on, let’s get you to the infirmary."

They arrived just as the class bell was ringing. Pompfrey did not so much as greet them before she ordered Lockhart to a bed and beckoned Harry over to her. The student she was attending to, a Gryffindor, judging by the soaking wet scarf hanging from the bed frame, seemed to have a flower pot fused to her head, complete with what Harry hoped was flitterbloom, waving its tendrils around
lazily, unperturbed by the healer’s efforts.

“What has Mr. Lockhart gotten himself into today?” Madame Pomfrey asked, frustration clipping her tone. “A dragon, perhaps? Or did he heroically save an innocent bystander from a rogue suit of armor again?”

“Er, he says he needs his arm amputated,” Harry admitted, hoping maybe the ridiculousness would keep him on her good side. “But Professor Quora didn’t seem all that bothered. I think he might have sprained it his wrist. I think he annoyed a Hufflepuff while they were practicing *expelliarmus*.”

Pomfrey made a sudden exclamation and jabbed her wand at the pot again, and Harry watched with fascination as the magic finally worked, the unnatural attachment slowly pulling away from the girl’s head until it came entirely free and fell harmlessly onto the bed, the flitterbloom straining to reach for its host.

“You had best take that back to Professor Sprout, Miss Patil,” she said sternly. “And stay out of trouble! Do mind your brother’s example.”

“My brother was a Ravenclaw,” the girl said blandly, standing and picking up the flower pot in one hand and the scarf in the other, holding them each at a distance. “So he never did anything interesting ever when he was here. That’s why you never saw him, ma’am. I’d rather be here once a week than be that boring.”

“Well, you will be joining Mr. Lockhart there, then,” the matron said dryly. “And he is a Ravenclaw as well. Make yourself scarce!” She turned and eyed Harry. “Was there something else you needed, Mr. Harrigan?”

He shook his head, paused, and voiced tentatively, “If you had a headache potion to spare, I’d… but, well, it’s not…”

“Nothing you’d like to stay here for?”

Harry smiled weakly. She was probably used to that.

“I’m afraid if it is not bad, it is better for you to take nothing at all,” she said. “You take them too often already, and they begin to lose efficacy when you do. Perhaps you should put in an order of aspirin from the apothecary when you’re next in Hogsmeade.”

Harry blinked. “They sell aspirin… at an apothecary?”

“Well, it is not as though it is not without its uses,” Pomfrey explained, bustling over to the waiting boy. “Perhaps you would benefit from some as well, Mr. Lockhart, for all the scrapes you find yourself in. It would certainly save me a good deal of trouble… Aspirin does not interfere with magic, Mr. Harrigan, and so it is occasionally used when a patient is on a long-term potions regimen. But not often enough that I keep any on hand here. I’m afraid I can’t help you unless you want to have a bit of a lie-down.”

“That’s alright; it’s not so bad,” Harry said quickly. “And I’ve just got office hours left, anyways. I can sleep it off after, if nothing else.”

“Very well. Let me see that arm of yours, Mr. Lockhart.”

Harry hurried out as she turned to address the boy, though he paused beside the door to get his bearings. With the bell, the rest of the classes had gotten out for the day, and he could feel the students in their eddies, going this way and that to clubs, office hours, the library, or their
dormitories. Harry disliked the chaos of passing period—it gave his mind a new reason to frantically reach for each individual's magic, trying to make sense of their seemingly random paths through the halls. It did not help his headache at all. But he was able to identify fairly quickly the route that would put him in contact with the fewest number of other students, and he set his course towards it as he focused on his breathing and trying to occlude against his own mind.

The path took him along an outer hall, one that did not connect neatly to anything else and would take twice as long to return to the defense classroom. Harry didn't mind that; Quora had sent him off to the infirmary, and he could have gotten away with loitering to see that the Lockhart boy was alright, so what did it matter either way if he took the scenic route? Not that it was particularly scenic—he took to walking on the castle side of the hall, just to get away from the white light reflecting through the grey skies and off the grounds. The snow had stopped, but that just meant the light was brighter, and with his headache...

He came to realize, as he rounded the last corner before his path would connect with the main hall the defense classroom branched off of, that it wasn't just the headache that was bothering him. Or it was, but it wasn't merely the warning pain of pushing at the edges of his absent memories anymore. Those hurt more and never lasted so long. This was the sort of pain that didn't hurt, precisely, but was more an overwhelming sense like the air around him was pressing in on his skull. Harry paused, and let his attempts at restraining his magemetry go again. He even closed his eyes, and let himself follow the sense of it...

It took a minute to understand. It was like trying to determine what had happened when the temperature only changed by half a degree—he could tell that something was different, but he was searching too small for an answer. It wasn't until he let himself push further, out all the way to the very wards of Hogwarts, hundreds of meters up in the sky above the castle, that he noticed something different. Even then, the wards were too thick and powerful to precisely determine what had changed. Was there another layer? Well, what was one in the midsts of a thousand years' complexity? But he could feel it, as different in its character as when Quora unleashed his magic from it's contained state.

He was so focused on the wards that he might have missed the shift—but then again, had he not been so focused he might not have noticed it at all. It was like a drop of ice water trickling down his throat, and he quickly opened his eyes again, half expecting Peeves or one of the other ghosts to have passed a hand through him.

He was still alone. The hallway was still otherwise empty, though the sounds of students going about their days echoed around him, indistinguishable noise.

Harry frowned, glancing towards the windows again. He took a few steps forward, but did not quite notice he was doing so, searching for the source of the feeling. Nor did he quite know how long he stood there, immersed as he was, but around him Harry could feel Hogwarts’s magic shifting, and knew it, too, and felt the disturbance so...

At last he found it, down below on the grounds, much smaller and closer than he had been searching for: a number of people he could not recognize by their magic. Adults, clearly, and most of them agitated, their magic bubbling and clashing against each other—though only one was actually casting a spell, and it was slow, intricate work: a ward, perhaps, or something similar. One of them had something else—some sort of device, connecting with a thread down towards the gates to Hogsmeade. Harry frowned, confused by the thread, and managed to follow it through the wards—

And beyond, though it was faint, he found more objects, stronger than the one being carried in the courtyard but impossible to get a clear sense of at this distance, through that much magic. Even so, he
could tell that they were some sort of anchor for the layer to the wards that had initially thrown him off. It was an uncomfortable enchantment… a physical barrier, Harry thought, blocking anything from physically passing through. If the way its magic sizzled at his curious prodding was any indication, touching it would be like touching an electric fence.

Harry took a deep breath and turned back to the unfamiliar crowd. They felt just as hostile as the magic of the ward. He wondered vaguely if they were here to cause trouble—should he alert someone?—but there was already a professor on the scene. McGonagall. And several more on the way, including…

“Mr. Harrigan?”

Harry blinked several times, but it was easier to reach out and identify Quora by his magic than turn and look and divide his focus away. No hostility there—the intruders were more important. What if they were coming to attack the school—but who besides Death Eaters would attack the school? With Quora in residence, he didn’t think that likely.

“Mr. Harrigan,” Quora repeated, a bit more firmly. “Why haven’t you returned to the classroom?”

Harry opened his mouth, though he was unsure how to explain—

One of the figures threw a spell at another, who blocked it easily. McGonagall’s magic flared, and she sent out—it felt like a shield dividing the newcomers, but weak.

“Mr. Harrigan?”

Quora was suddenly right in front of Harry, and Harry licked his lips, unnerved by the closeness. He blinked several times, bringing himself to focus on the man’s chin, and cleared his throat, willing himself to lift a hand and gesture at the window. “Intruders, I… think…” he explained.

“Intruders?”

Quora frowned, turning to look out the window, and Harry finally realized that he could, too—and he saw them there, down below, figures red and black against the snow, in the brief moment before another spell went up with a flash of blinding blue light, and Harry’s focus slipped away again.

“Do you know who they are?” Quora demanded, though his voice was soft. When Harry did not respond, Quora pushed his shoulder hard enough that he staggered and had to catch himself, an effective, if crude, means of regaining his attention, though the spark of magic at direct contact would have been enough. “Harry. Do you know who is out there?”

Harry shook his head, biting his cheek to hold himself from distraction. “Dumbledore’s almost there, and some of the professors… there’s six, I think, six I don’t…”

One of the unfamiliar entities flared and let off another spell, releasing an almost chain reaction of four others, fired off in short succession… Then Dumbledore arrived on the scene, and everything became contained again…

Quora grabbed him, and the contact broke Harry’s focus again. He blinked, staring at the clasp of the man’s robe, trying to steady himself.

“Go to my office and stay there,” Quora ordered, even as he gripped Harry tightly by the forearm, drawing his wand and pushing back Harry’s sleeve with one bizarrely coordinated movement. The coordination was not so alarming as the ease with which he drew his own blood: slashing his wand across the palm of the hand that gripped Harry, leaving a deep red gash, which without the slightest
hesitation he pressed into the pale skin along Harry’s scarred forearm, mouth running in a stream of fluid Latin laced with power. Harry felt himself transfixed by the action, by the sudden contact as a piece of that magic sunk with the blood into his skin… that magic: terribly alluring as it drew Harry in…

A sharp pain burst across his cheek and pulled Harry’s senses away from the magic-filled stupor, and he looked up before Quora could strike him again, realizing too late that he was looking straight into the steely-grey eyes and could not look away.

“Go to my office,” Quora commanded again, the words echoing in Harry’s thoughts as he released his grip and sent Harry staggering back, a fresh burst of magic following. “Do not let anyone see you. You have been there waiting—reading—for the last ten minutes. The wards will let you in. Go. Now!”

“But I—” Harry began to say, but then he felt a feeling not unlike the jolt of a portkey, a hook around his navel, that spun him around. Go to my office and stay there, a whispering voice echoed in his ears. Harry shuddered and tried to stop, but even as he did so his legs ached with pain, urging him to go forward. Do not let anyone see you.

“No,” Harry whispered, setting his jaw. He could feel Quora disappearing down the hall behind him. Outside on the grounds, the strange figures were bubbling with magic, just waiting to burst at the surface. But the foreign magic was burning at his bloodied arm and coursing through his veins, and there was a feeling like barbed wire wrapping slowly around his brain.

Go to my office, the voice coaxed again.

He could resist the Imperius, Harry reminded himself, even as his legs began to move of their own accord, his muscles shaking with the effort as he tried to hold himself back. A bead of sweat dripped down the back of his neck. His temple throbbed, and a pain bloomed out from it, back into his skull. His arm was burning, like— like—

“No,” he said, more emphatically. No, no, no; Quora could not just order him around like he was some—

Outside, someone let a spell fly, and it was joined shortly by two others.

GO TO MY OFFICE, the voice snarled—and it pushed against his chest until his heart was pounding with too much pain to bear, and his throat constricting until he started seeing black sparks. NOW!

Harry ran, and ran, through the hall and up two flights and into the classroom and between the desks and up to the door and—

Once Harry was through the door, the weight of Quora’s command lessened, and he heaved a great breath, as though it had been pressed against his chest and only now released. Even with the buzz of the magic on his forearm, his mind was suddenly clear, and he scowled, knowing the spell must have had something to do with that.

“Shouldn’t have looked in his eyes,” he told himself, but then he turned and hurried off towards the window, to look out onto the snow-covered lawn. He could see there several figures, shadows against the drifts, from their body language and gesticulation arguing, maybe even on the brink of drawing their wands and having at each other. One was clearly Dumbledore—who else would be
wearing sunflower yellow robes, and even from the high window Harry could distinguish his great white beard—but the others were unrecognizable at this distance

After the briefest hesitation, Harry flung open the window to lean out through the layers of Quora’s ward that were woven where the glass sat normally, and before he could get distracted by the rest of the castle he reached out for Dumbledore, whose magic even among that gathering of witches and wizards was like a beacon in the dark. And there was Quora behind him—the darkest of the shadows. They both had their wands in hand, as did the other professors gathered about.

Now, without the wards in the way, he could pick them out individually. Three stood together, one with magic controlled, one gathered for a spell yet uncast, and the third with angry swirls lashing out around them. Another four, the ones in red robes, were slightly more spread out, three with spells ready to throw, one a bit closer to Dumbledore, whose magic was as coiled as tightly as Quora’s. He squinted down at them, watching as the controlled of the three held back the uncontrolled from charging towards the four. Quora’s magic, as ever, drew his attention the quickest, so when he began to shift he noticed right away, and then Dumbledore’s began to expand, and then—

Something crashed into Harry, sending him toppling back through the wards and onto the floor, the sudden absence of magic leaving him too dazed to protect himself as he rolled into Quora’s desk chair, ending up face-down halfway under it. He groaned, glad that this time his glasses hadn’t gone flying off his face, and rubbed his head where it had hit the stone, but was cut off by a shrill screech—his breath catching, he rolled over, reaching for his wand, and looked up to find—

An eagle, proud and easily recognizable from when he’d been sent the bloody quill, perched on the back of the chair, glared down at him, flapping its wings irritably. Harry shut his mouth and glared right back—though he did inch his way to lean up against under the window, out of the range of those wings.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded. The bird clacked its beak at him and shifted along the back of the chair, talons sinking into the leather and drawing Harry’s eye to the strip of parchment tied around its leg. Harry’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Why would he be writing to himself?”

It took only a moment to realize there were plenty of other people the bird could have been carrying communication from—it very well could have been a reply to something He had sent—but he wasn’t going to get any answers out of the bird, and he didn’t dare get within reach of those talons or that beak. It seemed content to wait on the chair for the moment, though it turned its head to keep one eye on him. Harry should probably have done the same—it had knocked him in through the window; who was to say it wouldn’t push him through to fall to his doom—but the temptation of figuring out what was happening out there was too strong. He gripped the frame of the window tightly and shoved his head back through the ward.

For the moment that his sense floundered about, trying to make sense of the world, he managed to focus on what he could see. Or, rather, what he couldn’t, because even though his view of what was happening had been limited before, at least the figures had been in sight. The lawn was now deserted.

Quora was easiest to find, moving quickly up the steps on the fastest route Harry’s way, but the others weren’t with him. He closed his eyes and searched for Dumbledore, and surrounded by so many adults who all seemed on the edge of bursting into a mass duel they were like a bonfire in the school of children. He recognized McGonagall, Flitwick, and Slughorn moving along with them, keeping the two groups divided, though one—he thought it was the controlled one from the group of four, but he couldn’t be sure—was alongside Dumbledore, leading the way. Everyone except Dumbledore still had their wands hand, the connection between human and wood an easily
recognizable thing, even as they passed through hallways with students.

Dumbledore didn’t seem to need his wand—Harry could still tell that it was him tightening the school wards around the group. There was no way of being certain as to what they would do if the headmaster released them full force, but he didn’t think the man would take chances with his students all around them. He frowned, leaning further out the window and shifting one of his hands to touch the stone of the castle walls, trying to get a feel for the way the school’s magic flowed. It was always a tricky business, that, since the magic was so powerful he had a tendency to get lost in it, but it was pulling him towards what he was already focused on, creating a swirling tunnel around the path to the headmaster’s office, pulled by Dumbledore’s call, and—

Once again Harry was forced back through the wards, though this time it was not by an eagle, but by the tight grip of long fingers digging into the back of his robes, casting him aside. Harry managed to catch himself, this time, though his elbow hit the floor and his glasses slipped off. He snatched them off the stone and shoved them back onto his face, ready to snap at Quora, but the force with which the man shut the window stopped him. His magic was shifting, and while as always Quora held it tightly within the confines of the space his body occupied, it was pushing the limits. His face was cold, betraying none of the irritation his forceful motions hinted at as he whirled around, but his magic—Harry swallowed, wishing he had the null ward, and scooted back towards the corner. Not that distance would really matter if Quora’s control broke.

Quora didn’t even glance at him as he approached the bird, which held it’s leg out obediently, not daring to so much as nip at Quora’s fingers as he untied the string holding the strip of parchment and pulled it free, running it between his fingers to combat the curl as he swiftly read the message there. After a moment he flicked one hand out and the top drawer of his desk opened, a quill dripping with fresh ink snapping into his hand, and he bent over to write something on the back of the strip. It took but a jab of his wand to command the parchment and string back around the bird’s leg, and he opened the window again. The eagle, which Harry recognized now was too wide for the opening (it must have folded its wings in and dived, Harry being but a small obstacle in its path), hopped up to Quora’s arm, and he moved it outside, where it lifted off with a powerful demonstration of the strengths of its wings.

The whole procedure could have been made much simpler if he would have used an owl.

“What made you notice the men on the grounds?” Quora asked, staring, for a moment after the bird.

It took Harry a moment to realize the question was directed at him. “Oh,” he said, “Er…”

“Their magic, I presume? You noticed that through all the rest of Hogwarts?”

Harry shifted, slightly, but somehow he felt like he shouldn’t move from where Quora had tossed him. Not if he ever wanted to leave that spot alive. “The, um, wards,” he said. “There was something different. And… then I noticed the people. After.”

There was a long moment of silence. The eagle had disappeared from Harry’s view of the window.

“We are going on a field trip, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said abruptly, shutting the window again and returning to his desk. He dug this time in the second drawer, which as he opened it Harry could feel contained several uniquely magical items, two of which he selected.

“A ‘field trip’?” Harry echoed. “You mean—off campus? I’m a student, sir, I can’t just—”

Quora ignored him and hoisted Harry up by the arm. “A field trip,” he repeated thickly as he snatched Harry’s hand. Between them, there was something small, metal, and lighting up with a
spell, but Harry could not tug his hand out of Quora’s tight grasp, and then there was a feeling like a hook in his navel, and the office whirled around them—

Harry hit the ground hard, shoulder protesting the angle that he rolled to, hand still gripped tightly in Quora’s, coughing as his ears rang. Around him, the world still seemed to be swirling, even though when he opened his eyes all he could see was Quora’s boots on a dusty wooden floor, completely still. Even Quora’s magic, normally the pinnacle of grounding forces, especially with direct contact, was difficult for him to grasp. He blinked, shaking his head, and then was yanked up again, crying out as Quora pulled him to his feet.

“Give a bit of warning, would you,” Harry tried to groan out. He hated portkeys.

Quora ignored him, releasing his hand, and Harry stumbled back into—a table, it seemed. Without the contact, the spinning slowed, and the world came into clearer view, small, grey, and dusty as it was. They were in an unfamiliar room, apparently rarely used, though he noticed that the dust wasn’t stirring, and on the spot he had fallen, there wasn’t even a smudge, nor footprints from his staggering. There was magic there, he thought, but it was too hard to pin down.

The portkey, whatever the object was, disappeared into Quora’s robes. When his hand withdrew, he had replaced the portkey with another object, small, gold, and attached to a long chain.

Harry’s breath hitched. At that moment, the world was entirely still.

“This is—”

“A Time Turner,” Harry breathed.

A Time Turner.

It was an exact replica of the one drawn in Roman Artefacts & Curios. Roughly the size of a galleon, easily fitting in Quora’s palm, a series of circular golden bands surrounding a tiny hourglass filled with fine black sand undisturbed by gravity. The second ring from the outside was marked with black Roman numerals carved and inked into the gold, I to X.

In between the bands, Harry could feel that there were markings—some sort of runes, though none that he could identify, intricately woven and singing with the potential for complex magic. It was ancient, older than Hogwarts, surely, but the device was in perfect condition, not a numeral worn or out of place. Had he not been able to feel it, Harry might have thought it had been made new, but he could, and the magic was—the magic was—he longed to reach out and touch it, there in front of him, precious metal that might hold the key to everything he had—

“You’ve seen one before?”

Harry swallowed, and tore his eyes away, barely catching himself from looking up into Quora’s eyes. Why did he have it? That one existed at all at this point was—was beyond Harry’s wildest hopes, but that it was in his hands…

“In a book,” he remembered to say. “Curios and Artefacts of Roman Origins. I thought… there hasn’t been one in use since…”

He trailed away, and risked a glance towards Quora’s chin, reminding himself not to lick his lips or give himself away so obviously. He could pass his enthusiasm off as… well, as a side-effect of his bookishness. Yes, that was what it was; any other interest he tucked away behind his occlumency, and he refused to pay the device any attention.
“Curious,” Quora said after a long silence passed. “You cannot believe all that you read, Mr. Harrigan, for we are going to use this now. Come here.”

Reluctantly, Harry stepped away from the wall. If it were any other situation, he would have been thrilled at the chance, knowing the experience could change everything if he observed it well enough, and yet… traveling back in time with Quora when something had obviously happened…

Quora yanked him closer, and with a sharp tug the chain grew even longer, and the man threw it over both of their necks. Immediately Harry could feel its magic washing over him, not unlike the way the wards he had designed felt. Unlike those, it did not stay on the surface but bound to every inch of his body, and Quora, too. It made Harry’s eyes water, the magic invading him, and while he couldn’t sense it he knew it was occupying the space where his own magic existed without pushing it aside, and the doubled density was nauseating.

He blinked several times against the stinging tears, and watched as the long, pale fingers manipulated the dials, each click activating the runes carved inside—he would watch and focus, and not get lost in it, he would, so he could review the memory as many times as he needed later, and he would dissect it and know it and know how—he would not get lost in it, he wouldn’t—he—

He was vaguely aware it was over—the active magic of the Time Turner had run its course. Where the portkey had left him spinning, this was a displacement that he couldn’t quite pin down. Things were distant and close all at once, like he was experiencing the world through a camera zooming in and out at the same time, growing to overshadow him while becoming so small he could stretch his arm out but it would always be shrinking just out of reach. And Harry, with all the magic inside and around him, felt like he was squeezing to fit into his own skin while echoing in all the emptiness of his chest.

He tried to steady himself, and stumbled into something solid, as the chain was removed from around his neck. It was a delicate object, but it like a great weight had been lifted from him as the energy that had filled him began to retreat.

He breathed in relief. It was premature.

The magic didn’t leave him entirely. Even with the Time Turner off of him, most of it clung inside of him, trailing slowly away like the granules of sand flowing in the hourglass. The sensation wasn’t unlike what Harry felt when he had activated the wards—it was still the Time Turner’s magic, but it was separate from its host and the duplicity—forget how Harry’s distorted perception of the world was at the moment, this was nauseating, fully and truly, and he could taste the bile rising in his throat and felt helpless to stop it—

He was shoved back just before he retched, and if he hadn’t managed to grab the edge of the table in time he would have landed in the puce gunk he had spewed on the floor. He stared at it for a moment, how it seemed to hover over the dust on the floor before the magic that was keeping the room untouched shimmered and the refuse sank into non-existence. The smell, however, remained, and between the magic, the sight, and the stench he began to gag again, even as he tried to hold it back.

Another burst of magic striking the back of his neck and sinking in towards his chest pushed him
over, and he retched, folding down further as the heaving shook his body… but nothing came up.
Whatever he might have left in his gut to expel came in contact with the magic that had struck him,
and he could feel something in his chest constricting to try and follow its natural course of action. He
retched until he burst into a violent coughing fit, the pain in his chest coupled with a cramping in his
diaphragm. He had been under Quora’s Crucius twice now, but this, this sensation that his body
was out of control, fighting its natural course—this was almost worse.

As the fit began to calm, Harry looked warily up, trying to regain his sense of place. His vision
remained ill-focused, everything too sharp and yet without a sense place, close and far, in and out.
Quora, for once, seemed to slip through his senses, and while Harry could tell he was using magic it
was hard for him to sort out the spells. He swallowed, staring unseeingly at the back of the man who
had moved over to the window.

At least he hadn’t actually sicken up on the man. If whatever curse he had used in response to
Harry’s puke was any indication, if it had actually gotten on his robes, or—Merlin forbid—touched
the Dark Lord’s person…

For now, however, Quora had his wand trained on his own face. He was murmuring to himself, too
low for Harry to make out the words but in contrast with the silence otherwise only disturbed by
Harry’s rough breathing, the magic he was working delicate and precise and making it very difficult
for Harry to look at him because he knew, logically, that Quora’s face was on his head and he could
see the back of that head, but the spells themselves were scattered, some feeling like they were being
cast from a great distance even as others made Harry wince and pat his own face to be sure they
weren’t affecting him. He watched in wary fascination as the man’s hair darkened and shortened,
breaking free of the silver band which had clasped it at his nape, the band beginning to fall but
redirecting free of the silver band which had clasped it at his nape, the band beginning to fall but
redirecting midway to zoom into the pocket of his robes.

The man turned his face this way and that, inspecting his sharpened features, and for a moment the
light struck him just so that his reflection in the window stood out brighter. Harry’s breath caught. He
stumbled back again. There wasn’t anywhere to go but into the table. It became clear what was
happening; he was using the glass as a mirror to charm his appearance into that of Voldemort, and it
was—hang on—

“Voldemort?” Harry rasped.

The man, all but restored to his Lordly appearance, turned a little further, raising an eyebrow as he
glanced back towards Harry. “You do have courage, Mr. Harrigan,” Voldemort drawled.

“I can say it,” Harry realized. He wasn’t sure if the revelation was a relief or a horror. “I can think it.”

Voldemort sighed, and turned back, tapping his wand to his temple. The steely grey eyes darkened to
a near-black, glinting with unnatural reddish specks that came through even in the muted image of
the reflection. “Are you really so surprised? You are now in the presence of Lord Voldemort, not
Professor Quora. It would be rather odd if you thought of the Dark Lord by your professor’s name,
no?”

He seemed satisfied, and turned around, regarding Harry coolly. Harry swallowed and quickly
looked away—a painful choice, as it seemed any hasty movement was enough to worsen the
distortion in the world. But he could feel the spells much clearer now that they were all settled, and
had to ask: “Why are you wearing a glamour? Isn’t that your natural—er, usual face? Whereas the…
Quora one is a disguise, right?”

Voldemort raised his hand, swelling with magic, and for a moment Harry stiffened, the thought that
as the Dark Lord the man might have less patience for his questions (not that he had much to begin
with) crossing his mind, but it was quickly apparent that Harry’s magemetry was distorting the strength of things, too. The door of the room, previously unnoticed, clicked open, and two dark shapes flew in. One, Voldemort caught easily; the other slammed into Harry’s chest before he could process that it was actually moving his direction, not away. Flinching at Voldemort’s dispassionate gaze, he slowly leaned over to retrieve it from where it had fallen at his feet. It took him several tries. The length of his arms had never been so difficult to judge.

“Some changes are more permanent, so that they might stay in place under detection and disarming spells. That is what you have done to your own scar, is it not?”

Harry frowned, resisting the urge to flatten his bangs down. It wouldn’t make any difference. Voldemort unfurled the item he had summoned for himself, revealing it to be a long robe with billowing black sleeves and a dark hood that trailed down the back.

“It would be impractical to completely undo the spells now, for such a brief trip, and to have to put them back into place before returning to the school. Impractical, and there is simply not enough time.”

He pushed his arms through the sleeves and gave Harry a pointed look when he remained still. Harry hurried to follow suit. His Hogwarts robes were less suited to having something over them, as while they were fitted along the lower half of the forearm the upper sleeve was loose and billowy. He supposed that fashion wasn’t the key concern here, but the layering felt awkward—not to mention the additional layer of magic, faint as it was, of some sort of runic seal embroidered in the seams.

“Hood up,” Voldemort said sharply as Harry finished with the clasps holding it shut over his chest. “We wouldn’t want you to be seen with the likes of a Dark Lord, would we, Mr. Harrigan.”

Harry frowned, feeling cornered as Voldemort came to stand in front of him, but flipped the hood up as directed. “Where are we going?” he asked, keeping his eyes fixed on the man’s chin.

Voldemort smiled thinly, not really a smile at all, and before Harry could return his hands to his sides he reached out and snagged one of them tightly, hand slipping under the billowing sleeve to get a firm grip on his wrist. “Do try to keep up,” he said, and jerked sharply away—and once again they were spinning, spinning, spinning…

...coming to his senses again was like landing in a bizarre nightmare in medias res. His legs were moving clumsily and mechanically forward through no action of his own. Voldemort was ahead, the black cloak and smooth gait and bitter touch of the magic propelling Harry forward making him like a dementor. If he summoned despair, Harry was not yet present enough to feel it. Or anything, for that matter, beyond a general confusion.

Wand in hand, Voldemort stepped purposefully along a narrow channel between two layers of a ward. Harry’s feet were landing in the exact same steps, trainers filling larger boot-prints in the half-frozen mud, which accounted for a portion of his awkward movement: Voldemort was a good foot taller than him, and that reflected in his stride. Harry’s mind, unoccupied by managing his bodily tasks, wandered over the wards, following the whole dome across, the distance between the two layers a perfectly even meter in every direction, flawless save for two spots where the magic twisted together into a knot, the point where it came together, the keystone, in a sense. The outer knot they
were walking away from, the inner, towards.

When he reached the spot, Voldemort stopped abruptly and turned towards Harry. Though his legs still moved of the spell’s volition, something in his face made the Dark Lord tilt his head, considering him. “Have you regained your senses?” he asked, his voice rattling about in Harry’s skull as Harry tried to make sense of the words.

Harry opened his mouth. He was supposed to respond, wasn’t he? But what was he to say—words, yes, but what words? What had Voldemort asked? Did he know the answer? He stood there, gawking like a fish, no sound coming through. After a moment Voldemort sighed, beckoning him closer. Harry’s body obeyed. A hand settled on Harry’s shoulder, and Voldemort pushed him towards the knot in the ward…

…a door shut behind them, the sound breaking through Harry’s renewed stupor. It was cold, made worse by the dark and the stone floors, Harry’s automatic breath freezing in front of his face and swirling away into nothingness.

Echoing footsteps and the touch of familiar magic was Harry’s only warning before Voldemort stepped around Harry and grabbed him by the chin, tilting his head back and examining him, searching with his dark eyes—

It was the glint of red in them that did it. Harry flinched away, jumping back, breaking through the spell on his legs, the spots where the man’s fingers had touched prickling angrily from the contact. He staggered away, trying to shake the veil from his mind. Nausea rose again, but he pushed it down, because the curse was still there in his chest and he did not want to face that pain again…

“Do get ahold of yourself, Mr. Harrigan,” Voldemort said, impassive. “We have work to do, and you will need to be fully alert for this to succeed.”

“Work?” Harry echoed, throat like coarse sandpaper shredding his voice down to a minimum.

“Yes. Work. I’m afraid there’s been a little situation, and a number of my people will be coming face to face with a full ambush of aurors, and we are to warn them. They will be there in approximately…” He paused, pulling out the Time Turner from his pocket to check it. “Ten minutes. We must time this with extreme precision. You and I will be there only until they show up. You will notify me the moment they do.”

Harry bristled, eyeing the device. It was still messing with his magemetry, he could feel it. “Why should I? I don’t want any part in this.”

Voldemort returned the Time Turner to his pocket. “Because you are with me, and if you are caught, that will be Azkaban without question.”

“I’m not one of your Death Eaters! I haven’t agreed to—”

“Do you think the aurors will care? You have been previously seen at Death Eater events. You have spells on your mind that their interrogators will find every excuse to try to break through.”

“But I don’t—”
“Don’t try my patience!” Voldemort hissed. He turned and marched up the stairs, and to Harry’s horror, the spell reclaimed control of his legs and wrenched him along with it. They climbed up towards a door that flung itself open at their approach, and Harry could feel a spark of magic and see the sudden flickering of orange light as a fire started up inside. “We are operating on a schedule. If you must drone on with these petty complaints, you will wait until we are back at the school, though I give you the generous warning that I will deal with them without mercy. It is only that you already on the brink of being useless staying my hand now, as I do intend to make use of you.”

As if he weren’t in control of Harry’s movements, he reached back to snag Harry by the baggy over-robe, dragging him through the threshold and to the fire. With his other hand, he grabbed a handful of floo powder from a tray on the mantle and threw it down, the flames shifting from orange to green in a sudden burst.

Harry groaned. “Floo?” he protested weakly. As if this day could get any worse—

Voldemort ignored him, though if he was excessively forceful in pushing Harry forward into the flames, Harry was none the wiser.

The next thing Harry knew he was tumbling out onto another stone floor, groaning. If this kept up, he was going to come away from this day one walking bruise, from all the times he had been tossed about.

“...who are you, then?”

Harry lifted his head slowly from the floor, tilting it back until he could see a pair of sock-covered feet from under the drooping brim of his hood. Small feet. Not house-elf small, but child small. And… that voice. He jerked his head back sharply, finding the round and curious face of a girl no more than thirteen years old peering down at him, a wand leveled half-heartedly in his direction, and it was all Harry could do to stop himself from gaping before the floo flared behind him and Voldemort stepped through.

“My Lord!” the girl squeaked, jumping back and scrambling into some sort of mix between a bow and a curtsey.

“Miss Devereux. Fetch Thalia. Now.”

The girl whimpered and turned on heel, fleeing, as Voldemort reached down and hoisted Harry to his feet. Harry tore himself out from the grip, and found himself under the man’s sneer. “You really have a way with traveling misfortunes, Mr. Harrigan. Flat on your face by portkey and floo both.”

Harry scowled, but he looked away instead of responding, studying the room around him. It was a large room they had landed in, the size of the fireplace, taller by half than Voldemort, a clear indicator in that regard. The walls were covered in an elegant, if slightly faded, green and gold wallpaper. Despite the elegance, it was all but devoid of furniture, a single serving table against the wall by the door the girl had fled through. He turned his eyes towards the high ceiling, and found a gold (or, more likely, brass) chandelier with an orb of light gleaming inside.

Voldemort, it seemed, wasn’t interested in making such observations: the hand that had hauled Harry up planted itself firmly again and pushed Harry towards the doorway the girl had gone through, sending him stumbling into a hallway. “Could you stop that?” he demanded, wheeling about as quickly as he could without falling over, grabbing the wall for support. “I can walk. Without being pushed.”

“Don’t address me so casually,” Voldemort replied coldly, sweeping past him. “As far as anyone is
concerned, you are a Death Eater, and will show your Lord the proper respect. Redirect your energy towards monitoring the area.”

Harry rolled his eyes, and yelped as a stinging hex fired off in his direction, peeling himself off the wall. He scowled at the man’s back, and turned his eyes temptingly back towards the fireplace, scanning the mantle for a pot of floo powder, wondering if things could really get *that* much worse if he just… flooed to Diagon Alley…

There wasn’t one. Even if there had been, Voldemort would probably curse him before he let him leave...

In the direction Voldemort was headed, he could feel a number of unfamiliar people approaching. Harry made up his mind quickly—there wasn’t really any choice to be made. Not wanting to be caught away from the man who was his ticket back to Hogwarts, he scrambled to fall in a few steps back.

Voldemort halted just inside a large sitting room. It had a similar color scheme to the room they had landed in: dark wood floors, organically framed settees with dark green upholstery, and brassy gold walls. Though the drapes over the windows were tied shut, this room too was brightly lit by charmed chandeliers. Voldemort, in his robes so black that they seemed to absorb light, looked out of place—but all the more intimidating for it.

Harry followed the man’s gaze and the press of the approaching cluster of magics to another doorway, finding it just in time to see someone step through—another girl, he determined after a moment: probably a bit younger than him, dark skin, black hair cropped short, curls coming untucked from behind her ears, tunic-like robes that cut off just above her knees, loose trousers fit tight at her ankles beneath, feet bare on the wood floors. She looked windswept, though her face was carefully composed.

She bowed low as she stepped forward into the room, the girl from before just behind her with another awkward curtsy. That must make this older one ‘Thalia’, then. Behind them, a whole crowd was bottlenecking in the doorway, trying to get through. Kids, too, Harry recognized, ranging from the younger girl’s twelve or thirteen to perhaps eighteen, nineteen at the oldest, thirty or so of them total, all with a peculiar mix of fear and awe as they shuffled forward, staring at Voldemort with reverent fascination.

“My Lord,” the bowing girl said as she advanced forward a few steps, keeping her head bent as she came around the settee that had been between them, though she did not approach any closer. “Aggy said I could be of service?”

Harry had to admire her projected confidence. Flickering magic aside, he might not have known she was nervous, she spoke so calmly. It seemed she possessed a restraint the others did not.

Voldemort, however, was unimpressed. “And so, of course, you brought along your whole flock.”

Thalia looked back towards the others and stiffened at the sight, straightening somewhat as she hissed: “Show respect to our lord, you imbeciles!”

The gathered seemed to remember themselves, then, and bowed, not quite in unison, with a muddled chorus of ‘My lord’ s. Harry swallowed at the sight. Were these—no, they couldn’t be Death Eaters, even Voldemort wouldn’t…

Voldemort scoffed at the display. “Your control of them seems rather lacking tonight, Thalia.”
“I apologize, my lord,” the girl murmured, just loud enough. She didn’t bow again, but she tilted her head again down to project her shame, even as her words took a different course. “They let their eagerness to serve overwhelm their good sense. Lord Selwyn says he has never seen anyone forget their better minds so quickly, and yet we are saddled with a whole host of them. It is a disgrace to your cause, my lord.”

Behind her, the others winced, and some of their eagerness finally started to die. She seemed to be in charge, in some way, though she was not the oldest, nor her magic the most powerful.

“Clearly. After all, you cannot even keep them in the manor; how could anyone expect you to control them while they are inside?”

“My lord?”

Voldemort ignored her, calling out another name. “Emil?”

The boy—man, almost—in question immediately stepped forward, though his face was pasty as he bowed low. He opened his mouth, but his reply was soundless, and he did not straighten up.

“Your father assured me that you could show just as much tact as Cyril,” Voldemort drawled. Harry stiffened as he felt the man’s wand connect with his palm, but he could give no warning without risking himself. He… he didn’t even know these kids, maybe they… maybe… “And yet. You couldn’t resist the temptation, could you? The itch to go down into town? Lure out a mud, have a bit of fun, leave it behind when you got spooked?”

The boy was shaking, but he licked his lips. Don’t do it, Harry thought, for once on the safe side of Voldemort’s wrath, the outsider looking in, but the boy opened his mouth and tried: “My lord—”

“Crucio!”

Around him the other kids jumped back, crashing into the walls and each other as Emil toppled to the floor. Harry bit the inside of his cheek, willing the contents of his stomach to stay put, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the boy writhing in pain, nor coax his senses from the spell.

Pins and needles up his arm: it was almost like it was battering Harry, too.

Voldemort sneered as the boy whimpered, cutting himself off. “Your little bit of ‘fun’ was reported to the aurors. And guess what they found? The mud filth, very much alive, able to give descriptions of not only you, but your friends, too. Knott? Mael?”

This time, those called did not step forward, but the other kids pulled away from them, as though terrified that Voldemort’s inevitable crucio would miss and hit one of them, leaving the two in question isolated and obvious in their fear.

They tasted the pain one at a time.

Harry knew he should look away. This was going to fill his mind with nightmares for months—how could it not? Emil was at least Harry’s age, and the older of the two others was as well, but the youngest (Emil’s brother, by the matching dirty blond hair and watery blue eyes) was no older than ‘Aggy’ Devereux. Echoes of Quora’s lecture on the Cruciatus surfaced as thin limbs flailed about… Too young, and it can have permanent consequences… Voldemort did not seem to care, and no one else dared voice a protest. Not Thalia, though her hands were clenched into tight enough fists Harry expected her nails were breaking skin on her palms. Not even Harry—frozen at the sight, as intimately as he knew what was happening, that no one deserved it, especially not a twelve- or thirteen-year-old—
No. He couldn’t. Maybe the others wore expressions of similar terror; Harry still had no doubt that the moment he made a move against the Dark Lord they would pounce on him, a more reasonable target to act out their fear against. And Voldemort… he wouldn’t hesitate for a moment to turn his wand on Harry, either, and if he did… There was no point in trying; it wouldn’t achieve anything…

The youngest boy was let off, as Quora turned his wand back on Emil, but Harry couldn’t take his eyes away from the small body twitching against the stone. A few of the others seemed like they wanted to step forward to help, but they held each other back. Worse, in the edges of his vision, he could see the delighted faces of the loathsome few who seemed to thrill at the suffering of—what, their comrades? What was this?

At last Harry thought he couldn’t bear it anymore, and he started to take a step—

Only to stumble forward, falling half to his knees—

Voldemort spun around, catching him, spell cutting off and his grip digging into Harry’s arms. Tight—more bruises? —but Harry only distantly noticed, because his eyes were wide, not quite seeing.

He knew, too quickly, what this was.

A useful distraction.

“Wards,” he said thickly, just loud enough for Voldemort to hear.

“Breached?”

Harry swallowed, trying to focus. The magic over their heads seemed to be pressing down on them, but… “The outer layer is cracking,” he whispered. “Beyond that… there’s another. It’s… the magic that was at the school…”

“Anti-transportation wards,” Voldemort clarified. Against the wall, the kids began to urgently whisper among themselves, but the Dark Lord fixed his gaze on Thalia.

“A full ambush of Aurors is tearing down the wards,” he declared. “They have trapped you in with their own layer of anti-transport wards. Thalia, it falls to you to organize your retreat. Do not disappoint me.”

The girl’s eyes went even wider, but she gave a sharp nod and rounded on the others. Whatever she said, Harry couldn’t hear it, because once again Voldemort was dragging him to his feet, and set a brisk pace towards a door on the other side of the room.

The door led to a set of stairs, lit only by arrow-slit windows, narrow enough that the Dark Lord had to let go when he pushed Harry ahead of him up them. Harry paused to look over his shoulder when he heard the door click shut again, something about the noise enough to pull him from his general confusion. “We're leaving them behind?” he asked.

In response, Voldemort flicked him with a stinging hex, and Harry hurried to start climbing again. "We don't have time for chatter, Mr. Harrigan."

"But they—the ward—how are they—"

"They will figure something out, or they will be caught and face the aurors, capture, interrogation, and potentially Azkaban, depending on their age."

Harry's eyes widened, but then the ward cracked a little further, and he staggered under the magic
tearing apart.

"Up. Now, Mr. Harrigan!"

He managed to reach the top of the stairs, though he very nearly fell through the door as it opened in front of him. The room they had arrived in was simple in comparison to the sitting room below. The wood floors were a lackluster mud color, and the furnishings were only a pair of half-empty bookshelves, a faded blue armchair, and a floor lamp or no particular character. The windows were obscured by cream-colored hangings, but between them Harry could glance up and see the wards, made visible under the stress and the spells being leveled at them, spreading with hairline cracks.

Voldemort grabbed Harry by the back of the robe and dragged him to a door on the other side, which led to another hall, and from that they passed through another room, which was as plain as the first in architecture and completely lacking in furnishing. It did, however, contain a balcony with French doors, and the wizard dropped Harry and pulled them open inwards, letting in a flurry of snow stirred up off the balcony beyond.

Harry hardly noticed that, however, because Voldemort was summoning magic. Not magic like he ever let show while they were at Hogwarts, but an entirely different level, something base and dark and swelling out from him. It did not crowd Harry like it did when he would let his control slip, focused entirely on its task, but Harry was drawn into it nonetheless, entranced by the way the man called so much towards one apparent goal—and not just what he held contained within himself, but the traces of the magic in the air and building around him seemed drawn as if to a magnet and joined him just as easily. When he brought up his wand and let a stream of words in a harsh language Harry did not recognize, all of it funneled through the wood so precisely it was as if watching a laser beam. It burst forth, and with such a narrow focus that when it hit the ward it did not create new cracks but rather burst it in a perfect hole. Through it, Harry could much more clearly feel the second ward beyond as it, too, was punched through cleanly. The magic Voldemort had sent seemed to form a seal around the edges, pushing evenly in every direction to expand the hole ever so slightly, leaving a path to the sky beyond.

Voldemort turned around, beckoning to Harry. “Time to go.”

Harry blinked, then gaped. “You—you can’t mean to apparate through that! It’s too—there’s no way anyone could—”

Voldemort jabbed his wand, and the spell on Harry’s legs forced him forward—he needed to break free of that, but at the present it was the least of his concern: Voldemort intended to do the impossible; there was no way someone could apparate through so narrow a passage. Apparition, from how Harry understood it, required the one apparating to focus entirely on the destination, and the magic would determine the shortest route between the beginning and end points and attempt to travel it. Traveling through a hole that small would require a level of precision in directing the magic beyond the usual bounds of the spell, and—

Voldemort didn't seem to care to wait around for Harry's protests. He grabbed him firmly, hand snaking once more under the bulky robe to grip at Harry's forearm, and whirled about—and then they were turning—shooting through space—

If not for their destination, Harry might have once again been lost to the confusion of his distorted magic. He could, after all, still feel the bizarre magic of the Time Turner, and combined with the cracking wards, Voldemort's grasp, and the transportation, it was cause enough to faint, not to mention let his mind retreat from the processes of the rest of his brain. And if he had any true fear of heights, he might have fainted anyways. Instead, he let out an undignified scream, which vanished into Voldemort's other hand just as quickly. Even without a conscious fear, the suddenness of
standing midair on absolutely nothing had his heart threatening to burst from his chest, but it quickly became certain that they were very much not falling, or doing much of anything, really, except inexplicably standing on nothing, Voldemort's magic swirling around the both of them.

Voldemort, despite his quick movement to cover Harry's shriek, was otherwise ignoring him, peering intently down at the wards. Harry's horror at the distance was quickly replaced at a horror of the inner ward collapsing entirely, the shattering of the magic letting off a clap that would have the muggles in the nearby village looking to the sky for thunder. He watched, his senses rendered useless by the magic crowding the air like static, as a series of red-cloaked figures, bright against the snow, disappeared through the ward they had erected, but before he could get a clear understanding of what was going on Voldemort spun them about again and they disappeared.

Perhaps it was the total confusion of the day that kept Harry on his feet when they landed back in the room with unstirring. He was unsure, but the moment Voldemort let go of him Harry leapt back, colliding with the table.

"Aren't you going to do something?" he demanded.

The Dark Lord raised an eyebrow, and Harry realized he was staring straight into the red-flecked dark eyes. He quickly tore his gaze away.

"I've done precisely what I intended to," he said firmly, and as if to demonstrate his point, he raised his wand once more and pointed it towards his face, removing a few layers of the initial glamors with one tiny wave.

"But you—those kids, you left them there!"

"How very observant. Take off that robe; I need it back."

Harry clenched his teeth, but did not hesitate for a moment in tearing off the over-robe, tossing it aside onto the table. “Why didn’t you take us back earlier?” he wanted to know. “To warn them earlier, to get them out on time?”

“For someone who claims to want nothing to do with my side, your care for the welfare my people is quite touching… considering their welfare involves the evasion of the aurors."

“Your people! They’re kids!”

Voldemort fixed him with a sharp look. “My people. Yes. Every one of them.”

“You told me before that you only have Death Eaters who agree to follow you," Harry argued. "Ten-year-olds can’t possibly make decisions like that! Not decisions that bind them!”

“The youngest there is twelve, I believe, and she would be extremely insulted to hear you say so, and would probably hex you nine ways before you knew what happened," Voldemort said dryly. "They did not agree to be in my service in order to be treated like children, and so none of those who interact with them do. We have expectations to behave like the adults they have agreed to be.”

“Twelve—? You can’t expect that a twelve-year-old could just, what, press a button and suddenly be an adult! It doesn’t work like that! There’s plenty of kids who would rather be grown up already, it doesn’t mean—”

“We are very much aware of that, Mr. Harrigan.” The man turned, examining himself in the window, and with a few more waves of his wand, the by now familiar creases on his face re-formed. “But that is not my concern. They have all agreed to be treated like soldiers—requested it, even—"
and so we treat them like soldiers.”

“But they’re not,” Harry insisted. “They’re just kids. And if they’re picked up by the aurors…”

“Those that get themselves locked up have only their own incompetence to blame,” Quora sneered, turning back around. “It is their incompetence that lead them to be discovered, and if they cannot bear the consequences, then they are of no use to us.”

“But you could have resolved the situation by going back earlier! You—that letter, it must have said when it was to happen.”

“I could have. But these children, as you put it, aspire to be Death Eaters indistinguishable from their elders. If they cannot escape the aurors on their own, then they will clearly not prove useful in more vital conflicts.”

“But you lose your—your soldiers, this way!”

“Have more faith in them,” Quora admonished. “They have been trained by the best. Thalia may not look like much, but had she been sent to Hogwarts, she would have undoubtedly lead her class. Passing you in every discipline, I should think. As for those who will be captured? If they are caught, they will be of more use to me as children stirring the passions of the press than they will ever be as soldiers. Accuse us of courting panic, if you would like to carry on with your bickering; that would at least be accurate.”

Courting—

Harry gaped. “You want them to be captured?”

“No. Of course not. It would be preferable for them to demonstrate the fruits of the effort we have sewn to train them properly. But we do not allow for any risk without a contingency plan.”

Contingency plan? “You—you knew this would happen!”

“In a broad sense? Yes. The trouble with training an army, Mr. Harrigan, is that they go through a phase of being terribly untrained before they are useful. Did I know it would happen today? Or like this? No. But we are ready, whether or not the newest recruits show it.”

“They’re kids!”

“As are you,” Quora said, his voice bland, as he undid the clasps holding the black over-robe shut. “I really don’t understand why you are wasting your energy being outraged over this. You are a Ravenclaw, are you not? Apply that rational thinking your house so values.”

“Rational thinking says kids should not be being training to be your… Death Eaters.”

“And yet you did not protest at seeing Regulus on Hallow’s Eve. Nor have you used that in your own defense, though you are a good deal more childish than some of those we just left. I have told you before: I make investments, and I expect worthwhile returns.

“Beyond that, however? It is easier to mold a child into a proper soldier.” Quora’s eyes glinted, folding the robe, and Harry was chilled to find that he hadn’t returned his eyes to the more natural-looking steely grey yet. “If the programming were fully in place, you would have seen them younger, but that is a thought for the future, when the magical birth rate increases. It is best to shape children before they become convinced that fighting is ‘bad’. When ideals are easier to teach. With the right child, all you need is to tap into their desire to please someone, point them in the right
direction, and they are ready to bend to your will.”

Harry’s mind jumped back to the youngest boy, his body seizing under the Cruciatus, and felt nausea curling around his gut all over again. He hadn’t—why hadn't Harry— “That’s what you’re doing at Hogwarts,” he said flatly.

Quora glanced at him, then banished both the robe in his hands and the one Harry had flung onto the table to elsewhere in the house before turning to the window to adjust his eyes. “Not exactly. The ones you saw before—they all have something to prove. Bastards. Third children. Offspring of branch families. Those who attend Hogwarts… take more effort. Among those who are not my natural allies, recruitment requires a more delicate touch, and so assessment is necessary before overtures are made.”

Harry swallowed, his grip on the table tightening. Quora spoke broadly, but it was clear that he was one of those targets. He made no secret of it. If what he had gone through was a ‘delicate touch’, he feared what the kids from the manor had faced. Based on the haste with which Voldemort had put them under the Cruciatus, despite being of an age that Quora himself admitted

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Who are you going to tell?” Quora asked, and his tone was mocking. It did not grow any less so as he went on. “Besides, you are of worth. Your gift is of value to me, and when you decide… You are as much an investment as any of them. Perhaps a more expensive one, but that just means I expect more in return.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Harry.

Now, some announcements!

This may be my last regularly scheduled update on this story for a while. I don’t want to scare anyone with that—writing-wise, I'm sticking to my original plan, and have this story and not to die both completed and posted by the end of the year. However, at the end of July, I am moving internationally, and am not sure how long it will take me to have reliable internet. I may be able to post 7/28, but as that is the day I am flying out it won't be at the top of my priority list. (If you just want the general announcement: that's it! But here's some extra stuff about my overall writing stitch. This note will also be posted with NTD) Although I hope to be able to carry on with the writing habits I’ve developed that have allowed me to make weekly posts (between this story and NTD), the fact of the matter is: I’ve never moved internationally. On top of that my schedule is likely to get much busier once I’ve settled. That might mean that what has been my fairly steady daily word count (750 words per day) may drop, or I might not have time to write every single day. I don’t like the thought of that, but, well, gotta be realistic. Luckily, I have a good buffer. I have 33 of 36 chapters of ToTT written and am working this week to get several chapters ahead on editing, and while NTD is not so far ahead, the chapters are generally significantly shorter and quicker for me to write (and, consequently, require less editing).
So the plan is this: I am most likely not going to post in August, but instead focus on getting into a routine and re-establishing good habits in my new home. In September, assuming by then I have reliable internet, I will begin posting again. In that case ToTT will post weekly; NTD will depend on how much I’m able to complete during August. If I am able to get reliable internet ahead of September, I might start posting earlier! But the goal here is to take things off my plate, not add them on, so if things don’t settle as well as I like, it might be October or November before I start posting.

In the meantime, a peek a bit further beyond the veil, at what else I’ve been developing:
-Outlining for Glasslight, the sequel to Grey Space, which I know several of you are looking forward to. In terms of timeline, that could mean anything from ‘I have a good NaNoWriMo and start posting that next January’ to ‘in about three years I’ll finally have written enough to post’, but it is in the (very, very preliminary) works. (...I also still need to make my final editing pass on GS, just haven’t found the time to sit down and… do… that.)
-One of my favorite stories to have plotted, which starts out as a mystery regarding the disappearance of a young Harry Potter from Privet Drive and develops into a tale of Renegade Hufflepuffs Violently Against Voldemort (TM).
-Set This House In Order (...not the Matt Ruff novel) which is, loosely speaking, a story where Harry, having defeated Voldemort, is technically the ruler of the wizarding world, which Hermione and Kingsley plan to take advantage of to fix some of the bureaucratic issues of wizarding society before restoring democracy, but Harry is too distracted by odd side-effects of living in Grimmauld Place and summoning the dead.
-A story where Hermione and Ron say ‘Hell No, Harry, You’re Not Walking To Your Death’, and Hermione time travels back to the 1920s with Harry to research other ways to destroy a human horcrux, and also tear a rift in space-time. AKA the HP/FB&WTFT fic I never knew I’d plot.
-Lord of the Hallows is still sitting in my Drive, and every now and then the fancy strikes and I write a few paragraphs on that. What is Lord of the Hallows, you might ask? Why, an overly-involved crossover between Harry Potter and the Lord of the Rings universe, of course. What else? …I would like to post up through Rivendell for that, at some point, but that is fairly low on the list.
-The last episode of Footnotes has been about... Half-written for the last several months. I’m going to get to it someday, I promise. I really like how the last episode goes, it just… requires a lot of time to write it.

And some things that are not HP Fics:
-Salt/Water, which is my re-writing of The Force Awakens and The Last Jedi into something with logical character development and motivations that is intended to take all the premise points that were filled with such wonderful potential and turn them into a story that makes sense. (...and is a bit more queer, because it is me writing this.)
-The Ghost Story, which is a really cute not-fic story that I might work on for NaNo? If I have time! Has a sort of vibe like the Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman, and features a girl and her new best friend who is a ghost and also Winters, a reaper who is something of a therapist.
Chapter Notes

Extra warnings for on-screen death, brief discussion of (specifically underage) sexual assault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Six

A week passed without word of what had happened to the Death Eater children. There was some general curiosity regarding the group who had appeared on the grounds that Wednesday afternoon, but as all inquiries to the staff had gone unanswered, and as James Potter and Lily Evans were spotted arguing about the moon, of all things, outside Gryffindor Tower late one evening, the matter quickly faded.

Harry did not have time for gossip, but he listened carefully to no avail. If anyone had made the connection between the sketchy details of the auror raid that had been mentioned only once on the fifth page in the Daily Prophet and the unexpected visitors to the castle, Harry heard nothing.

As for Quora, in class he was the same as ever, and through their grading session that Saturday he had seemed preoccupied. After, he had sent Harry away. Harry wasn't sure whether he should feel concerned that the man was up to something, or relieved that he was not in line to face interrogation. Since that first Saturday, he felt like he had been dodging bullets—but by dodging them, he wondered, was he leaving the path open to strike others?

He tried not to think about it. It made for strenuous occlumency practice as he desperately sought sleep.

The next Wednesday, Quora cancelled his office hour, and Harry’s scheduled assistance along with it. Harry took the free time to note down everything he could recall about Quora’s Time Turner—which, disappointingly, was not much—and then translate more of the journal from the OMRL. It was almost a relief to fall back onto his research, though the more he read, the more it puzzled him. He only ever had time to work through it in short bursts, letter by letter, and it made it difficult to try and see the forest. Once he finished, he would have a chance to sit down and read it with a more focused, scholarly eye; until then he stole whatever time he could to go about the irritatively slow process of decoding the runes.

Between his own classwork, assisting Quora, his other projects (he'd ordered and received the materials he needed to remake the Null Ward, and was working on the beads as he practiced occlumency late at night), not to mention the apparition lessons scheduled for Saturday evenings beginning in February (which had taken almost all of Harry’s savings to be able to afford), Harry was hard pressed for even the scant amount of time he’d found to translate.

He had hopes, then, on Saturday, January the 29th, that Quora would once again let him leave
directly after completing the grading. He had gotten faster over the past month, and could work through a third-year essay in thirteen minutes, less if the grammar was good or the student wrote neatly, and he actually managed to finish the stack before the five o'clock bell rang. His eagerness to be done was perhaps too obvious, when he stood to bring the completed folio forward to set on Quora's desk for review, as the man suddenly looked up from his own work and straight at Harry.

"Bring your chair up, Mr. Harrigan," he ordered.

A clear dismissal of Harry's hopes to escape—and Harry could only nod. His luck had to run out at some point.

He picked up the chair and brought it up to rest before Quora's desk as requested, then sat and waited, through the bell, as the man completed whatever it was he was working on. Harry's hands were kept folded in his lap. Ever since that first… incident, he'd noticed he had made a habit of it, even outside of this office—of keeping his hands away from the armrest. It was a strange thought, to realize that he had picked up such a habit so quickly, and yet here he sat quietly in front of Quora, as though he wasn't the same man who had turned comfort to constraint, or the same one who Harry knew caused pain and suffering on a much greater scale than he wanted to consider. As though he really were just sitting in front of a superior colleague.

At last Quora set his quill aside, drying the ink on the page with a wave of magic that bent to send all the tools and files arrayed on his desk floating back into their proper places. He reached out to take the folio Harry had been working on, flipping it open with the casual air that meant he wasn't really going to check them. "You finished entirely?"

"Yes, I, uh, I did…" He swallowed, trying to summon the unaffected persona that got him through classes with Quora at the front of the room. "I didn't touch Bennet's, though. I'm not entirely sure whether she was writing on the topic at all… Maybe you can make sense of it?"

Quora hummed, paging forward to Bennet's essay, and scanned the first few lines. It was enough to make him raise an eyebrow, but he said nothing, simply closed the folio and sent it zooming back into place.

"There is a Hogsmeade weekend coming up," the professor said blandly, that same disinterested monotone he used to address students in class. "Do you have plans?"

Harry blinked. "For… Valentine's, you mean?" he said. He couldn't keep the incredulity from his tone. Who did Quora expect him to be spending the Valentine's Hogsmeade visit with—Hani? "No. Hector might try and talk me into getting a butterbeer at the Three B's, I guess."

"That is what you usually do."

Harry was unsure if that was a question or a statement. "I wouldn't say 'usually'. I've done it… twice."

Quora nodded again. He still seemed preoccupied, though he was doing nothing more than sitting, rapping his fingers lightly along the desk. "You will have to reject Mr. Smithe, this time. There is a rally that Sunday, and I expect you to attend."

Harry frowned, but held his tongue from his immediate retort, and the stirring unease. "I don't like your rallies," he said shortly. "There's too many people. It's chaos. Gives me a headache in more ways than one."

"You seem fine here. There's far more students in the Great Hall at lunch than there will be at the
"Fine?" Harry caught himself and his incredulity, reigning his voice back in with a sick feeling in his gut. How could he possibly be so casual, with that man? "I guess you could put it that way. Mostly I got tired of asking Pompfrey for headache potions and nausea draughts, and I wasn't about to tell her where it was coming from. She told me to get aspirin to deal with them." Harry paused. "From the apothecary in Hogsmeade, actually. I meant to get some."

"We can stop by on our way through the village."

"We?"

"You will be leaving with me on Sunday morning, at eight AM sharp," Quora said. "As I have no other means of insuring that you do not, oh, 'get caught up in reading’ and ‘forget'."

Harry gave it a moment’s thought, and eventually forced himself to shrug, though it felt like there was a great weight bearing down on his shoulders. He really didn't fancy another trip off campus, rife with potential for disaster and… and excuses for Quora to put more of his compulsion spells on him—pain, he could handle, but whatever he had done to Harry's legs when they had gone on their unfortunate 'field trip', it had taken Harry hours of meditation that night to sort out the best place to focus his cancelling spells to shake the magic. To be free of the risk of being magically frog-marched against his will.

He didn’t argue thought. What choice did he really have? He didn’t want to risk Quora’s irritation, and that meant he had to go to the rally. The worst that could happen was…

Well, Harry didn’t know. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know; he felt sick even considering imagining it. Quora seemed satisfied with his response, at least, and that was… That was enough for now.

"In the meantime," Quora went on, his voice gaining a bit of character as he stood, putting Harry, of course, immediately on the alert. "I believe we have some unfinished business to attend to."

Harry’s mind raced—it could be anything. They’d never had the conversation about Pandora, after all...

"Unfinished business?"

He tried not to squeak.

He failed.

Quora pulled something out of his desk drawer, and as soon as it passed through the wards Harry identified the Time Turner. Once again, he had to hold himself back from jumping to his feet and demanding to examine it, even as he flinched at the memory of how disorienting it made things...

"A week ago, two of mine were arrested, unable to flee with the rest when the aurors came," Quora explained. He beckoned Harry towards him, and Harry stood, though he made no move to round the desk just yet. "You may remember Thalia. She did succeed in her task of getting the rest of those under her command clear of the wards, and stayed behind to see the task through to completion, unwilling to flee and ultimately fail. As such, she is now contained in Azkaban, and there we will go."

"Azkaban?" Harry echoed. "But she—she wasn't even seventeen, was she? What crime..."
"They brought her in on grounds of obstructing justice and resisting arrest. I don't believe there has been or will be a trial. They haven't released her details to the papers, nor have her parents been contacted, on either side. I doubt they know who she is."

"Who she is?"

Quora beckoned again, unimpressed by Harry's stalling, and Harry reluctantly complied. Not that he particularly wanted to go to Azkaban—what was Quora even planning to do there? Break them out? No; if it was that, he'd take someone… criminal—useful—

But in a… twisted sort of way, the man was right. The way everything had happened so suddenly and without resolve, it did feel like unfinished business.

The way abandoning the kids and leaving them to the aurors had felt like unfinished business. Not that Voldemort had cared one bit about that.

"She is the eldest bastard of an influential member of the Wizengamot. A Lord, even, though he is neither firmly a Lit or a Lib, and notoriously difficult to pin down. His elder daughters, Thalia and Aglaea, were sent to my service by their mother. Perhaps to spite him, as he sends them gold but has no other relation—I neither know nor particularly care. The point is, if he knew that they were holding her, he would interfere, either to condemn her and declare his stance in the conflict or, more likely, to insist injury to his family name and demand her release, then ship her off to France or Canada, somewhere she could do no further damage to his name. As he has done neither, I can only conclude that Thalia has held her tongue. I am not surprised."

Harry frowned. It sounded almost like praise, the words coming from the Quora, even delivered as coolly as they were. "And… What are you going to do about it?" he asked warily, eyeing the Time Turner, remaining just out of reach.

"Do? I am not going to do anything. She is surprisingly competent, for a child, but she was incapable of keeping herself free of the prison, so she will have to serve me from there."

Before Harry could form a response to that, Quora reached out a hand. Fit perfectly into his palm was a silver coin, etched with unfamiliar writing and reeking of magic ready to activate. The portkey. Harry loathed to touch it, and even worse, it seemed just plain weird to, well, hold the bloody Dark Lord’s hand, and all...

Quora’s patience wore thin. He grabbed Harry by the wrist and pressed the coin firmly in the space between them, and then they were whirling away...

Harry took care not to puke or stumble against Quora this time. He had no interest in getting cursed again. He did, however, wrench his arm away, trying to push down the thought of the arms of the chair wrapping around his wrist—

Why was it that which kept setting him off? Worse things had happened that afternoon, and yet...

Quora did not let Harry recover from the portkey before throwing the chain of the Time Turner around his neck. Harry swallowed as he watched the man manipulating the dials with apprehension, but he was less… unstable this time around. Maybe he could get a better idea of the magic at work. He could feel the runes inside flaring to life as the dials shifted, and memorized the pattern. The middle ring, the one with Roman numerals on it, seemed to set how far back they were to go, as Quora turned it in a full circle and then to align the "II" with the end of the hourglass that currently held all the black sand, and the outer ring, which was unmarked save for a single, inwards pointing arrow, seemed to serve no other purpose than to align with that—
And then the magic was sinking into Harry's skin. Around him, the world went white and gold, and his right ear rang with a tone so clear it couldn't have possibly been real, but he kept his eyes open, focusing on the device, as in Quora's hand the arrow spun around once, twice, landing just off the "VII" mark and setting the volcanic sand into motion...

He didn't puke. Quora lifted the chain up from over his neck, and even as the magic split unnaturally Harry managed to keep himself upright. Quora peered at him curiously, but Harry just took a step back—into a table. Why was there always a table?

As the magic settled... well, settled was an overly kind way of putting it. As Harry became more used to the way there was a secondary layer of magic sinking into his skin that should very much not be there, and as he ignored another wave of nausea and blinked his eyes several times to keep back tears at the pain of the headache growing in his temple, he finally looked away and realized they were in the room with the unmoving dust once more. He glanced towards the window, hoping for some broader idea as to where it was, knowing that this was exactly the sort of place he should commit to memory, in case it was something that could be of use once he got out of this whole mess, but outside the window was a view of a tree overburdened by snow. They were probably still in Scotland, then, but for all Harry really knew they could just have easily have portkeyed to Scandinavia.

Before Harry could think of a way to ask 'where are we?' without the other wizard completely disregarding him, Quora thrust something towards Harry. A potion. Thick and... navy blue. Harry took the vial curiously, not recognizing it, and glanced up towards Quora's chin.

"Polyjuice," the man said, as he uncapped his own vial and downed it in a quick swig. Harry watched in fascination as the magic coursed through him. Where normally a potion would concentrate on certain areas, polyjuice had the strange property of lingering, the magic binding each cell in a shifted form. Combined with the time turner's blanketing force, behind it the man's magic was almost unreadable—almost, but not entirely. Just as he'd been able to tell in a heartbeat when Severus tried to fool him with Regulus under polyjuice, he could still find Voldemort in the mess, it was just more... fuzzy.

"Now, Harry," the man commanded. His face was still shifting, but his voice had become something a bit more nasally.

"I don't know what this is going to do with my head," Harry warned. "The time turner is bad enough..."

"Oh?"

"It... leaves magic behind, under your skin, and it's extremely uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable." Voldemort echoed. His eyes had settled on a dull blue, and his hair was lightening to a blond, but his eyebrows, thick and unruly though they were, were still enough to convey his displeasure. "I can remind you exactly how easy it is to make things uncomfortable for you, if you should like, Mr. Harrigan."

Harry shook his head, and quickly popped off the cap to the potion. It didn't look so bad, at least... not like there was a hair or fingernail or whatever in there...

It still tasted horrible. It was like swallowing a mouthful of sand mixed with black pepper, and he clapped a hand over his mouth to avoid coughing it back up again. And it hurt, almost instantly, and the magic was just as unpleasant, racing through his body like needles poking and prodding at this part and that to shift things where it wanted them to be. He grew about half a foot, and it was akin to...
his vague memories of Skele-Gro, with the magic stretching out his bone to cover much more space than it really ought to. He watched in horrified fascination as the skin on his hands bubbled, growing until each finger felt thick and club-like, the freckles lightening as his natural skin tone darkened—but not entirely disappearing. There were traces of them still there, which made Harry frown. He thought polyjuice was supposed to change him entirely?

When he looked up he found that his glasses were both uncomfortable on the new shape of his nose and distorting his vision, so he took them off and slipped them into his pocket. Then he leaned forward to try and see himself in the window, and found strawberry-blond hair falling in his face.

It took him a minute to recognize himself, but once he did, he frowned again. He was wearing the face of one of the boys from the manor, the one Voldemort had called out first to torture, but Harry remembered his hair as being fairer. And his eyes seemed strange, too; blue like Voldemort’s new face’s, but mixed with spots that were not as pure. Voldemort must have seen the difference to, because he grabbed Harry and turned him roughly towards him. A frown on his new face looked like a scowl.

"Must have been an imperfect batch," he said, and he brought up his wand, not letting Harry flinch away. Magic shifted between them, and Harry felt something new settle over his eyes. He reached up to rub them, but Voldemort slapped his hand away.

"Your name is Emil, and you like to call yourself Emil Wilkes, but your proper surname is Anderson," he said sternly. "You are the bastard son of myself, Lord Wilkes, and the older brother of Mael, who we will be visiting, and the half-brother of Cyril Wilkes, a Slytherin at Hogwarts."

Harry nodded slowly, absorbing this information. Cyril... the name sounded familiar, but he wasn't sure whether the boy was even his year. Maybe a seventh year. Was he a Death Eater? Was he the one who had been feeding Voldemort information about him, before—

His thoughts were cut off as Voldemort turned on heel, wrenching Harry with him into the dizzying climb of apparition.

Harry stumbled as they landed, but Voldemort held him upright, sneering. Harry barely noticed, however, because instantly he could feel the cold. Scotland and wherever the house had been we both still snowy and freezing, but it was a different sort from this chill. Here, it was as though the magic had been sucked out of everything around them, and with it had been taken the heat. The absence was disquieting, in a different sort of way than it was when he had worn the null ward, or even when he had been so exhausted he could barely keep on his feet. No, this was like a void, and it drew him in, pulling at his mind until his senses reached...

Harry looked sharply up. He could suddenly hear the ocean echoing in his ears, but all he could see was a smooth stone wall, jutting up into the night, narrow windows cut here or there, and above it—dementors. Harry wrenched his senses away from them as quickly as he could, eyes going wide.

"How do you keep your magic contained?" he demanded of Voldemort in a hasty whisper.

Voldemort did not answer. The hand on Harry's shoulder pushed him forward.

"I'm serious—I—they—they're going to—"

"Shut up, boy," the man snarled, tightening his grip. “Yates!”

Harry jumped at the volume of the voice, so close to his ear, which carried even over the crashing waves. Ahead of them, a slot in the dark stone opened up, and a hand holding a lantern stuck out.
Even though Harry knew, logically, that it was day, mid-afternoon at the latest, it was dark enough that the glow of the lantern bounced over stone, tining it with orange edges. Voldemort pushed Harry towards it, and he soon found himself face to face with a wary looking witch.

"Lord Wilkes," she said, ignoring Harry and looking up to Voldemort. "Precisely on time. How unusual."

"Mind your tongue, Yates," Voldemort snapped. "And get that blasted thing out of my face!"

Yates, if that was her name, rolled her eyes, quite a youthful gesture despite her papery skin. She lowered the lantern and stepped back, making room for the two to join her in the narrow passage.

Harry didn't move until Voldemort pushed him. There were wards in the stone, and the moment he stepped through, he grabbed for the walls, hoping it would keep him upright. The wards were as nasty as the rest of the place, but one specifically he recognized: the anti-transportation ward. The others were merely thick layers of magic to him, ones whose runes he could feel as though they were still etched into the stone, even though he had seen the outer walls to know they were smooth.

Behind Voldemort, the stone began to shift, but before it could even close completely the witch had turned and started walking and Voldemort pushed Harry after her. At least he couldn't feel the dementors in this space.

"You'll have to be back here within forty-five minutes," Yates said. "I'm only set to be on-location for an hour. The dementors wouldn't mind if you stuck around, of course... it's the cell walls that keep them from getting too close to the prisoners, but you..."

Harry shivered.

"It won't take that long," Voldemort said thickly. "Just show us the cell and leave us."

"Show you?"

They had reached the other end of the passage, ignoring several branches off in other directions. Yates stopped with her hand on the knob. "I don't owe you that much, Lord Wilkes. I said I'd let you in. You're in. It's a floor up, take a left, third from the end. I don't go out there unless I have to."

Harry admired her courage, in a way, but he supposed this Yates didn't know who she was defying. She thought it was just some bad-tempered pureblood lord. Voldemort, for his part, seethed, but then he gave a jerk of his head. Yates opened the door, revealing a tall, narrow set of stairs, the chill of the dementors setting in, and Quora pushed Harry forward.

"I'm serious, sir," Harry hissed as the door slammed shut behind them. "The dementors—I can feel them. They're like... they're..."

"'Uncomfortable'?" Voldemort suggested mockingly. He jabbed Harry's back, encouraging him to climb faster. Harry didn't know why he didn't just take the lead; he was always impatient for Harry to move. "It's a prison, Emil. If it were comfortable, there would be no point to it."

Harry scowled. "Well, can't you feel it? You must—combine that with my—thing. Come on, sir!"

"Of course I feel it," Voldemort drawled. "It is rather akin to an itchy robe. And your 'thing', as you put it, is a matter of magic, not souls, which is what the beasts feed off of. Even you should know that. Now hurry up, boy; we haven't got all day."

"An itchy—have you even got a soul?" Harry demanded as he reached the top of the stairs. He
instantly looked up, to the left, where open windows showed through to a triangular space between the three thick walls, and dementors floated idly, like lazy black holes that couldn’t be bothered to seek their food and instead drawing it in.

The man laughed, a wheezing sound with this strange voice, rather than the cold thing he regularly pulled off. "That would be the easy answer for you, wouldn't it? If I had no soul? The simple justification."

"Sir," Harry said weakly, but he didn't get much farther. He was stuck staring out towards the horrible shadows. He couldn't sense his own magic, but he could feel it reaching them and disapparating, slowly.

"What do you expect me to do about it, boy? If you are so 'uncomfortable', you can find a solution yourself."

But I asked for one, and you didn't respond, Harry thought. He didn't say it, though, not when he was shrinking into that man, his most hated enemy, to try and escape the creatures. But he did have a solution, he knew it, and he drew his wand out, summoned what little happiness he could imagine, and whispered hopefully— "Expecto Patronum!"

Voldemort halted in his tracks. Harry nearly melted into the floor in relief as a white light emerged from the tip of his wand. It seemed to hang, uncertain, in the air for a moment, but then it began to shift, slowly forming into a body, starting with hooves and long legs and...

Voldemort began to laugh.

Harry stared at his patronus in confusion. A thestral, leathery body and milky eyes, stared back at him, tilting its head as though wondering what it was there for, why Harry wasn't directing it out towards the dementors, it's natural enemy. Beyond, he could feel the beasts recoiling, hear them hissing, but that was lost under Voldemort’s laughter.

"Oh, that—you—"

It was strange, to see the man succumb so completely. Perhaps he was acting, but Harry thought he might really have lost control.

"Come along, boy," the man said, beckoning to him, mirth tugging at his lips and playing at the corners of those dull eyes, sparkling as they were with the patronus light. "And bring your friend. Oh, this is is too good."

"Good?" Harry echoed darkly (nothing good to Voldemort could ever be good for him) but he quickly fell into step.

Now that the corridor was lit, the thestral trotting along ahead of them, Harry could see through the bars into the cells along the right side of the hall. Several were empty, but Harry could see in others figures almost as skeletal as the dementors, huddled on their beds or on the floor, each staring into space doing nothing. Absolutely nothing. But a few of them stared out at them, eyes flickering with the ghostly light of the patronus, and those were the ones that had Harry hurrying to keep up with Voldemort.

The man seemed unbothered. Amused, even. “That is practically as light a spell as there can get. One of the few spells people use to try and argue that ‘light’ magic exists at all, really.”

“Okay…” Harry said slowly. “So…”
“You’ve used it to summon a thestral. A bloody thestral.”

Harry stiffened. “It’s not a dark creature. They’ve got them at Hogwarts. In the Forest.”

“Dark? No, they are not. They are, after all, only visible once you have internalized the experience of a death, accepted it… recognized the very thing that makes us mortal… meanwhile, the Dark changes its wielder to be more than their born self. Accepting Death has no part in that.”

Harry was unsure what to say to that. He couldn’t remember, exactly, the circumstances under which he had learned about thestrals (Perhaps after realizing it was his patronus? No, that didn’t seem right...) but he had thought they were only something to be seen after seeing death. After accepting it…

“So I used a light spell and laughed in the face of the Dark with it, is that it?” he asked, trying to get a sense of what Voldemort found so amusing about it.

“No… it is suiting, I think. If one of my followers is going to be able to cast a spell like that—well, it is suiting that it should come in so deathly a form, don’t you think?”

Harry scowled. “I’m not a bloody Death Eater,” he muttered.

His heart wasn’t in it, as he knew Voldemort hardly cared. He watched the thestral trot soundlessly along before them. He couldn’t shake but feeling that it was something new. That before, his patronus had been something different. What, though? And why had it changed? Was it because of the obfuscus, or had he really changed that much?

They came to an abrupt halt, and Harry drew himself out of his thoughts, squinting through the glow of the patronus into the cell. There was a figure huddled in the corner, arms wrapped around knees close to the chest, unmoving. There was a sound like quiet sobbing… but no, that wasn't from this cell; it was further down the line. Voldemort took a step closer—the figure didn't shift. Then he flicked his wrist, wand finding his hand, and rapped the wood against one of the bars, sending a single note, brief but clear, echoing through off the stone walls. The head jerked, and wide eyes reflected the silvery light—

"Lord Wilkes?"

Thalia's rasping voice carried her confusion. The patronus had her squinting, too, but against the brightness. She stretched her hand out, trying to block it from reaching her face, but not before Harry had seen it clearly: her eyes were puffy and red, skin battered, short black hair matted and unkempt. At the foot of her bed sat a plate of some sort of gruel, untouched.

"Mael is in the next cell, Lord Wilkes. He's not in here."

Still Voldemort did not speak, nor did he glance at the cell over. Harry wanted to speak, but he didn't know the role he was supposed to be playing well enough.

"Lord Wilkes?"

"Not quite." Voldemort’s voice had dropped, and even with the nasally tones the polyjuice forced on him, the effect he was going for was clear. "You failed me, Thalia."

Thalia stilled, then her eyes widened further and she jumped off the bed, tumbling to the floor in a bow. "My Lord! I..."

"I left you simple instructions, did I not?"
"Yes, my Lord, but I—I—"

Harry grimaced, watching her shake. Through the simple grey shift she had been left in, he could seen the bones of her spine sticking out. He wondered if she’d eaten anything, the whole time she had been here—she must have. She wouldn't be alive, would she? Not eating for a week? And a week wouldn’t do that much... But then again, maybe it was her hope: to die before she was faced with Lord Voldemort...

Voldemort hadn't actually cast anything with his wand just yet, but it lingered in his hand, ready, and Harry didn't want to see the inevitable curse. He slowly eased forward, the patronus following him, drawing ahead to peer into the next cell down the line, where Thalia said Mael was being held, where the crying was coming from.

At first he didn't see anything. He could hear the voice, but the cell was dark—extremely dark, darker than it should have been. It reeked with the feeling that the dementors had been there, imparting their evil and taking away any shreds of hope that might have been inside—but Harry couldn't see anything. He could feel something, though, small and flickering, like a candle that had burnt nearly to the bottom and it was only the barest scrap of wick left protruding from a puddle of melted wax, threatening to submerge and extinguish. And he could hear. The sobs were nearly voiceless, just unsteady breath punctuated by occasional moans, but he could hear them.

Then the patronus stepped forward, slipping between the bars. The darkness of the cell made it seem to shine brighter, its light pooling against the walls. It stepped forward and bowed its head towards the very corner of the cell, where there was a gap between the cot and the wall, no more than a few feet wide.

The sobbing paused. Harry's breath caught in his throat. Thalia was still pleading, and Voldemort hissing down at her, but the words fell off him as slowly an arm reached out from the shadowy corner. Small fingers unclenched, opening one by one, as it stretched forward—but it passed through the patronus's face. Harry heard something like a gasp, and the hand turned this way and that, but it wasn't following the shape of the thestral at all, just playfully in the light.

He couldn't see it. The boy, curled up in the corner of a cell in Azkaban, no hope of escape, couldn't even see a thestral.

Harry took a step back, then another, until he had backed into a wall. He could see Thalia's eyes flickering towards him, face written with confusion, then recognition, then confusion again. He swallowed, trying not to look at the hand of the boy playing with the pretty light. She had failed the Dark Lord, but she was—she was older, at least. Not quite so young. Probably not so... innocent.

"Stand up," he could hear Voldemort demanding of her, and he watched as she tried, grabbing at the bars and trying to haul herself to her feet. She fell before her knees were unfolded. "Stand up!" the wizard demanded again, louder, a harsh snarl.

"My Lord, they broke my leg," she pleaded, even as she tried to stand again. Harry glanced down, but her skin was too dark and the patronus hidden by the solid wall between her and Mael's cells to be sure. "The aurors, they…"

"Pathetic," Voldemort sneered. "So you come here, and you let yourself waste away. You fail at clearing the manor, and now you fail at being any use."

She got further, relying entirely on her arms to hold herself up, all her weight on one leg, shaking. "My lord, they tried—they wanted me to tell them—to tell them—"
She let out a shriek as she could no longer support herself and her weight fell to the other leg, and down she went, collapsing, head bouncing off the bars with another clang ringing through the prison. Harry could feel the air behind him shift, and he turned, finding a dementor drifting to their level, and while it had no face or eyes he could feel the exact moment its gaze found him—

But then his patronus came forward, settling itself firmly at Harry’s side, and the dementor recoiled with a hiss. It was all the way across the empty triangle, but the patronus seemed to travel the same distance as Harry’s senses. He shuddered, and reached out to stroke his hand along it, letting the calming warmth of its magic climb up his arm, overriding the dementor and the polyjuice and the Time Turner to ground him there, just that magic personifying happiness and hope, as distant as they now seemed…

Voldemort reached through the bars, grabbing Thalia by the neck and hauling her up along them. Harry turned sharply back as she hissed in pain, but his eyes went to the boy emerging from his corner, crawling, following the light, no doubt, red-eyed and pale as a ghost.

“What did you tell them, Thalia?” Voldemort demanded.

“Nothing, my Lord!” she gasped.

“Emil?” the boy breathed, his voice as thin as he was but loud as drums in Harry’s ears. He lifted himself up somewhat, stepping forward. Harry couldn’t move any further away—nor could he escape the memory of this very same boy under Voldemort’s Crucius a week and a half before…

“Nothing, Thalia? You did not defend your Lord when they dared speak our name, or laugh at their incompetence at they attempted to trick it out of you?”

“I said nothing, my Lord,” Thalia swore, hands grasping and slipping on the bars. “They are fools. They cast crucio with less vengeance than Aggy. I told them nothing. Not a word.”

“They cast crucio? Curious. It seems Crouch and Bagnold are acting ahead of their legislation…”

“Emil?” the boy asked, pressing up close to the bars and stretching a hand through, seeming not to notice Voldemort, disguised as his own father, at the next cell. “Emil you—you left—you—”

Harry could feel Voldemort’s magic spiking with irritation as the younger boy collapsed, and he hurried forward, crouching, directing the patronus back through the bars. It pressed its nose into Mael’s cheek, but this time, the boy didn’t seem to notice.

“You left me—you—why—”

“Shush,” Harry said lowly, glancing towards Voldemort.

The man carried on, the flare in his magic the only sign he gave that he’d noticed them at all. “And what use are you to me now, Thalia?” he sneered. “Locked away in Azkaban, leg broken, wasting away?”

He dropped her abruptly, and the girl cried out in pain as she fell on her injured leg. “My Lord,” she gasped. “I can still—I will—”

“You left me there—” Mael insisted, searching Harry’s face. “You—why did you leave me—”

Voldemort turned sharply, ignoring Thalia’s platitudes. “And what of you, Mael? I doubt in here you will be of no more use than it was at the manor. Have the aurors questioned you, too? Did you confess to them your part in Emil’s play?”
Mael did not seem to notice, staring as intently at Harry’s face as he was. “Why did you—you left me—”

“My Lord he—the aurors couldn’t get anything but babble from him,” Thalia said. She looked up, straight at Harry, and for a moment her tear-filled eyes widened in confusion, but she was distracted by her own pain and squeezed them shut again, trying desperately to keep talking. “Emil and Thoman managed, but Mael he—after the curse, he couldn’t get up. Some of the boys grabbed him, but then there was fighting, and... I got the others out, but I had to—he was just sitting there, babbling gibberish. But when I grabbed him he started fighting me, screaming bloody—they found us quickly. I closed the exit. He hasn’t—they argued over sending him here, or to Mungo’s. But at Mungo’s they would tell Lord Wilkes, and here—they haven’t told them we’re being held, have they? They haven’t—”

“Lord Wilkes is aware. As is Cyril.” Voldemort looked down at Mael with a harsh coldness, and Harry was almost overcome by the urge to jump between them. He didn’t, but the patronus shifted, and when it did Mael finally looked up from Harry and found the man looming over all of them.

“Father?” he breathed, falling back from his crawl—but before he had even landed his eyes went wide. Harry gritted his teeth, watching as Voldemort legilimized the boy, his nose welling up with blood that trickled down his face, that bitter magic curling around him. The patronus stepped forward and kneeled down, laying its head on the boy’s shoulder, but it was beginning to flicker.

At last Voldemort broke it off, and Mael’s breathing evened somewhat. He was still glassy-eyed as his chin fell to direct his stare vaguely Harry’s direction.

“Nothing,” Voldemort said, though his voice sounded almost unsatisfied. “He will waste away, here. Dead before the week is out.”

Harry swallowed. What else could he do? Demand Voldemort break a boy out of Azkaban? Mael shouldn’t even be here—who would throw a kid that young into a prison filled with dementors? What crime were they holding him on?

Voldemort turned back to Thalia, producing something from his robes and thrusting it through the bars at her. Harry’s eyes widened as he felt, then saw, what the man was offering: a wand.

Unfamiliar to Harry, but a wand, whole as it was. “Take it, girl,” he sneered. “Can you even fix your own leg?”

Thalia’s hand reached up, shaking, and she managed to grasp it. For a moment, the wand flared, reaching out to make the connection to her magic, the way any wand would in the hand of its master. But Thalia’s magic, weak as it was, faltered. If they were connected at all... maybe Harry was just stretched too thin to notice, with the patronus and the dementors lingering as close as they dared.

“Episkey,” the girl whispered hoarsely, jabbing it towards her leg.

Nothing happened.

“Episkey!” she repeated, again, more forcefully, and again, when that failed. “Episkey! Episkey!”

Nothing. After the first try, her magic didn’t even flicker, and the more desperate she grew the more painful it was to watch. She broke into a fresh round of sobbing, and Harry wondered if it wouldn’t have been kinder to leave her without the tool.

Voldemort glanced down at him, the question clear in his eyes. Harry’s hand clenched, nails digging into his palm. He wouldn’t condemn her like that.
Voldemort took a long, deep breath in, and for a moment Harry thought he was going to sigh. He didn’t; instead he raised his own wand and leveled it at the girl. “What use are you, then?” he repeated, softly. “You swore your life to the service of Lord Voldemort, Thalia. But here you are. Is there any use left in you?”

Thalia sobbed harder, hand clenching tightly around the wand. It kept reaching out, trying to find her magic, to grasp it and guide it forward like she wanted it to, but the wand could not work miracles. She was too far gone—and she said as much, choking out echoes of Voldemort’s cruel analysis between heaving breaths.

In Voldemort's outstretched hand, his wand purred cruelly as the magic gathered. The unfamiliar face of Lord Wilkes went strangely slack, and after what seemed like an eternity, his lips moved, just enough to form two words: Avada Kedavra.

A green light.

In Mael’s cell, the patronus went out.

Thalia’s body toppled back, her head landing in the food dish, the gruel pooling around her head, the wand slipping from her fingers and rolling towards the bars. When it came to a rest beside them, Voldemort reached down, picked it up, and slipped it back into his robe.

“Come, boy,” he said, turning on heel. “We are leaving.”

Harry stared blankly towards Thalia’s body, still as it was, the injured leg, more exposed to the air, bent awkwardly away from her.

The candle extinguished. She hadn’t even had enough magic to leave smoke.

“Boy,” Voldemort repeated.

Harry could feel the dementors again. They had noticed the patronus failing. He pushed himself up, staggering forward—but there was a sound beneath him and a hand stretched as far as it could through the bars to grab the bottom of Harry’s robe.

“Don’t go!” Mael cried, his blue eyes wide. “Don’t leave me again, Emil! Not here! Not in this place with those—those—things!”

“Now, boy!”

Harry could feel Voldemort’s magic beginning to come free of its tight hold, and he yanked his robe free of Mael’s grasp, the cry echoing in his ears as he ran.

“Don’t leave me! Emil don’t—don’t leave me here! Emil!”

When the door slammed shut behind them, at the bottom of the stairs, it wasn’t only the dementors that Harry was glad to escape.

Harry remained silent as Yates let them out the side exit. He did not even try to ground himself as Voldemort grabbed him by the shoulder and apparated them back to the house, nor did he hesitate
when Voldemort handed him a little vial of polyjuice antidote. Nor did he flinch as Voldemort raised his wand to dispel the illusion over his eyes.

Let the magic come, he thought darkly. Let him drown in it.

It didn’t work. Not even the portkey back, whirling and nauseating as it was, could get the echoes of Mael’s voice out of his mind. He staggered back to the chair he’d sat in before, folding his arms tight over his chest.

“I’m not a Death Eater,” Harry said at last.

Quora raised an eyebrow. Harry swallowed, and mustered his strength.

“Why did you take me there? Why not—why not Emil?”

“You’re more useful to me than Mr. Anderson. And besides, there was something you needed that he did not.”

Harry bit. “What?”

“Closure,” Quora said. “You can’t pretend that you haven’t been wondering what happened to them. Now you have answers. You’ve seen it through to the end.”

“And he wouldn’t? It was his brother—”

“He made the choice to leave Mael behind. For all he cared, Mael was dead. You care more than him, for all the good it would do you.”

Harry closed his eyes. Someone like that… well, he’d volunteered to be a Death Eater, and went out of his way to break even their rules for some unsanctioned muggle-baiting. Mael cared, clearly, but he’d been too young. The choice wouldn’t have been his. Not really

“I am not a Death Eater,” Harry said again, quietly, but firmly, opening his eyes again to look at his hands. “You said you only take them on as willing servants. I have not agreed to any of this.”

“No,” Quora agreed. He leaned back in his seat, arms folded casually across his chest, an image that would only have been completed by throwing his feet up on the desk. He studied Harry, steely eyes half-lidded with indecipherable thought. “You haven’t.”

Not yet. It hung between them, as tangible to Harry as the magic in the air. He curled his fist a little tighter, but as it hadn’t been said, Harry couldn’t protest it, not without playing into Quora’s hand.

“So I have no obligation to make excuses. If anyone asks why I have been missing more than usual, I will direct them to you.”

“No obligation, but you are under a gaes.”

Harry tipped his head, ever so slightly. “But you forget I have practice in dealing with those. It is easy enough to behave out-of-character, and when you have people who care about you, they notice those kinds of changes.”

Quora hummed. “We will see,” he allowed. “But I wonder how soon it will be that you change your plans. And what you will ask for.”

What he would... ask for? Did he think Harry so stupid as to try and make a deal with the devil? There was nothing Harry wanted from him, except to be left alone. And that was something it
seemed Quora would never give him, and Harry would have to take his freedom for himself.

He shook his head, but bit his tongue to hold back the most exploitable of his indignation and redirected the conversation instead. “And I’m curious as to how you’re going to explain keeping me beyond my contract-approved ten hours per week.”

“How indeed.” For a moment, the man look amused, but then he swiveled his chair about and rolled languidly up out of it, approaching the window. “I could, of course, simply inform my questioners that I have become invested in your success as a student, being more used to individual tutelage. It would be the simple answer.” He sounded amused with that, and Harry narrowed his eyes. Quora turned halfway, glancing over his shoulder towards Harry with a peculiar smile. “An unsatisfactory choice, however. Far too boring.”

“Boring?” Harry echoed. “Isn’t that what you want? To remain undetected?”

“To an extent. But Timothy Quora is not a boring man.” He came around his desk, leaning against it to look down at Harry—and Harry’s anxiety jumped from zero to one hundred at the sight. It was exactly as they had been the first Saturday, when Quora—Harry didn’t want to think about it. He shifted his arms further from the armrests, and pulled his feet away from the legs of the chair while he was at it, and the moment Quora showed any sign of using magic, he’d—

He’d what? Run away screaming? Merlin knew what would happen if he fought back, but it wouldn’t be good…and Harry had no illusions that he would stand a chance. Not here, in Quora’s territory.

“Haven’t you wondered why dear Timothy hasn’t been brought in to teach before?” the man asked, his voice uncomfortably soft. “There’s hardly a wizard in Britain with more experience teaching, outside of the staff here. And as Dumbledore hasn’t been able to hold down a Defense teacher for more than a year recently, and as recruits are already growing thin, you might have expected the Governors to push for his appointment sooner.”

“No, actually,” Harry said blandly. “I’ve only been here since last year. Last year’s teacher was competent, if boring, and they replaced Burke quickly enough.”

Quora’s smile didn’t waver. It was kind of creepy, especially considering how little expression the man let onto his face in the classroom. Unsettling in the way clown makeup was.

“Timothy has never been recruited because he courts controversy,” he said. “His usual clients are the type of pureblood who adhere to the older traditions…ones which make the purebloods you have interacted with here look modern and liberal. I confess, a handful of them are even beyond my understanding, as to how they have stayed so firmly out of time.” He chuckled. “There is one family in particular who refuses to speak any language in the home aside from Latin—proper Latin, they say, though we can only assume it has been bastardized by being contained and shaped in one home, as much as the Latin known to the world has been bastardized by the passage of time and death of the common language.”

“Sounds like your kind of people,” Harry mustered.

“Some are. Some are not. They are Timothy’s kind of people, however, as he as the benefit of being brought in as an outsider among them. He can play to the customs he wishes, and ignore those he does not.”

“And what does this have to do with explaining my absences?”
“Did you pay much attention in Professor Binns’ class?”

Harry blinked, thrown by the non-sequitur. History? “Not particularly. He just went on and on about the Goblin Wars…” It was easier to read the textbook and ignore the lectures, and when he’d had a scheduling conflict with Runes in spring he’d dropped the class entirely.

“Ah, yes. The Goblin Wars. His pet project, I recall, one which had him taking sanctuary from the wrath of the Ministry.”

“…what?”

“Don’t you recall your contract? Teachers cannot inform on other teachers to the government. Hogwarts is, and always has been, beyond the Ministry’s grasp, and so vocal political activists such as Binns… well, he has grown rather tedious in death.”

Harry stared at Quora’s arms, folded across his chest again, suspiciously.

“What does this have to do with… with explaining my absences.”

“Oh, simple. Many of these old families believe that the best model of magical learning is through a form of apprenticeship.”

Harry stared at him blankly. Quora sighed, and waved a hand towards one of the bookshelves, and it was only thanks to his reflexes that he managed to grab the book out of the air before it hit him in the face. He flipped it over. Stamped into the leather cover was a title—*The Roman Legacy*.

“It’s a model that was adopted following the first major shift in magical-muggle interactions in Britain, following the Roman invasion. You could call it a Roman-influenced model, but, well. The aspects that were pulled in are hardly prime examples of what Roman culture offered. It was severely bastardized to begin with, and with time…” He paused. “This is a useful book. You’ll find references to time turners in there as well, if you wish to know more.”

Harry tried not to react to the prospect of a new resource, giving a simple nod. “And… that model is… controversial?”

“Well, the master-apprentice relationship could be taken to mean anything. It could range from nothing more than a few hours a week spent working together to near slavery for the duration of the contract. And regardless of how often it was actually used that way, certain *potential* components seem to be of more interest to the human mind. Especially minds like Timothy’s.” He paused, regarding Harry. “It could often include a sexual component, to put it bluntly. By which the master has access to the apprentice as they wished—legally, by the contract, regardless of consent and age.”

Harry gaped at him.

“That’s disgusting!” he finally managed, horrified. Quora just chuckled—that made it worse, how little he seemed to care about what he was saying.

“Oh, I quite agree, as does the Ministry, on paper. Timothy hardly cares what people think about him; there are always customers to be found, backwards or ignorant enough not to care about his reputation…”

“And you—he—me?”

Quora laughed again. “Well, it would be an easy enough idea to give, hm? A few careful words here or there, fueling the gossip chain, a well-placed image as I meet the eyes of one of the legilimens on
staff… You are of age, after all, so unless you wished to press charges, there is nothing they could do about it, and no way to prove it, unless they want to confess to being legilimens. And as for the image… well. All I have to do is—"

And then he released his magic, the bastard. Wasn’t this what Harry had wanted? To drown in it, not to think? But he felt himself leaning boneless into the chair, the edges of the wood sharp against his arms, and ground his teeth, trying to pull them closer to himself.

“That’s not the same,” he ground out—though he was sure the syllables were scrambled. He could barely hear himself, with all that magic—

Then it was gone, and he let out a breath. He was panting like he’d run a mile, and everything was bright, too bright.

“Obviously,” Quora drawled. “I suspect you would be a much less useful person if it were, judging by what I know of the teenage psyche. But it is the image that counts—have you attempted that sort of occlumency, yet?”

“Wha...?” Harry slurred. The magic was gone, but he felt exhausted.

“Projecting an image. Making a legilimens see something false.”

Harry shook his head. If he had mastered something like that, he definitely wouldn’t tell Quora about it.

“Perhaps I’ll have to teach you,” Quora mused. “When there is more time. Next summer, perhaps. You, at least, have a first-hand grasp at what failure to meet my expectations means.”

Harry’s stomach turned. He didn’t know which was worse: the thought of learning any sort of occlumency with Quora or the thought of being with him next summer. But on top of that was the thought of people thinking that he and… the professor he worked for… that they were…

“And you don’t mind having them think that of you?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“It’s not of me, it’s of Timothy, and most people already think that of him, even if they don’t have any proof.” Quora’s dark smile was not reassuring at all. “And without proof, they have no grounds to stop him from teaching, and since he does not care what people think… It’s not my reputation at stake here; the only one that stands to be damaged is yours. Which is easily avoided if the topic does not come up.”

“And you don’t care that someone like that works for you?”

It seemed like a stupid question, as soon as he said it, considering who he was speaking to, but Quora only smiled. “Timothy may be disgusting, but he is useful, and I have nothing to be concerned about,” he says. “And I assure you: he is hardly the most repulsive of those who serve me. They are useful, and know that if their hobbies become a liability, they will wish only for an easy death.”

So that’s what this was. He was trying to horrify Harry into keeping his secrets, blackmail, really, because Harry was not a Death Eater. Well, he had succeeded… and Harry hadn’t really figured out a way around the gaes, in any case...

Quora seemed to sense that Harry had given in. “It could be worse,” he consoled, still smiling. “I really could have sent Timothy to fill this role. Imagine if you really were sharing this office with a man who would have no moral qualms at all about pursuing you, an of-age wizard, to fulfil his appetites, hm?”
That was… Harry did not want to think about it. It made his head hurt even trying to think of the question which was worse—and he pulled his arms even tighter around himself.

“Can I go?” Harry asked. Quora hummed and looked down—at the time turner, Harry realized.

“Yes, I suppose we better had,” he said, standing.

We? Harry thought, but he stood, picking up his bag from where it sat abandoned by the door, and followed Quora out beyond his office wards and down the hall to—

A broom cupboard. The same one Sirius had cornered Harry in at the beginning of the year.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Harry groaned. After that conversation... “What on earth—”

“The easiest way to avoid having to explain your absence is for you to be present,” Quora said. “Unless you would prefer the other option, in which you will need to get in here anyways.”

Harry glanced into the cupboard. Well, at least there were buckets, because he felt like he was going to be sick. Quora followed him in and shut the door, and the two of them stood there in the dark for a moment. He could only see by the faint light coming through the crack under the door, but Harry could hear Quora moving around, and track the magic in his body in the uncomfortably close quarters—and then he felt the time turner being thrown over his neck, and—

When the world was solid again, he ducked out of the chain and clambered around until he found one of the buckets. The sounds he made as he sicken up were especially pressing in the small, dark space, and the smell—

“Disgusting,” Quora said, sounding unimpressed.

“You’re the one who broke my ward,” Harry snapped, and he didn’t have time to regret it before the last remnant of his lunch pushed their way up.

“I recommend you go down to supper,” Quora said when he was done. “And ask the elves for some chocolate, unless you care for nightmares from your contact with the dementors.”

“I can’t leave a broom cupboard with you!” Harry said, scandalized. “There are people out in the hall! I—they—”

“Wait for them to leave, then,” Quora drawled. “As for myself…”

A moment later, the Time Turner was spinning again, and Harry was treated to the experience of observing time travel as a bystander. That might have been useful to his research, had he not been too busy dry heaving.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! So, as you may have noticed... I wasn't able to keep to my posting plan that ilaid out
in the last set of notes. Sorry about that. Unfortunately, sometimes in the process of depositing you on the other side of the globe, life throws you curve balls like making additional big time commitments and then having your laptop break beyond use. So... right now, I have no answers, as to questions of 'when'. Its a balance of editing the complete chapters, and finishing the last few. Hopefully after december I'll have a bit more time, but...

Thank you, as always, for your comments! I know I haven't been able to respond as I regularly do, but they are a huge motivation, especially for these chapters that require a few more spoons to work through.

Until next time!
"Harry?"

Harry looked up from his book, and quickly closed it, marking the page with his finger. Regulus stood over him, shifting his bag from one shoulder to the other, a quiet smile playing on his lips.

Harry glanced at the clock. It was eleven forty-five in the morning on Tuesday, the eighth of February. Harry didn't have any morning classes, so he had been in the library for hours, getting caught up on homework—and then, when he had finished early, delving into the book Quora had lent him. Regulus, on the other hand...

"Got out of class early?" Harry asked.

"Professor Quora gave a quiz," Regulus explained. "A follow-up to some of the questions from the mock OWL that some people have been struggling with."

"But you did."

Regulus shrugged a shoulder. "Are you coming to lunch?"

Harry glanced at the clock again. "I suppose I should."

"Walk with me?"

As class was still technically in session, there were very few students in the halls, which made for a quiet walk. It was a relief, really—Hogwarts had been too loud, the last few days. He couldn’t look at the first-year boys, or the seventh-year girl, without… And he couldn’t see Quora in the midst of all the students without thinking of…

It had to be a lie. An exaggeration. What Quora had said about… the other Quora. Harry had found the section in the book, and while, thankfully, it didn’t go into detail… it didn’t sound quite as…

Ugh.

He couldn’t actually—Dumbledore had hired him. The board of Governors—Hell, the other teachers accepted him. If he was really—if what Quora had said was true, Slughorn, Flitwick—none of them would be so friendly with him. It was just a sick twisting, just Quora trying to scare him. To—

To distract him. That was all, and it was working.

"I was wondering, Harry, if you had plans for this weekend," Regulus finally asked as they started down the stairs, jolting Harry out of the dark thoughts he’d fallen into.

"This weekend?" he echoed, trying find relevance. “Oh, uh… For Hogsmeade, you mean?"

"For..." Regulus glanced around, but leaned in and spoke a bit softer. "The rally."

"Oh. Uh... right. That. This weekend."
Regulus smiled, leaning back a bit. "If you don't, I was wondering if you wanted to go with me. I realize you and Severus haven't been on the best of terms recently, but—"

"Hey! Reg!"

Regulus stiffened, and Harry bit back a groan. It was Sirius. Harry was surprised he hadn't noticed the other boy coming up behind them, but… he had been rather distracted.

Harry and Regulus glanced at each other and kept walking, but Sirius was undeterred, taking the steps two at a time to reach the landing at the same time as them. He threw his arm around his brother, taking advantage of his bulkier build to pull Regulus away from Harry.

"Is this Harridan bothering you?"

"It's Harrigan, for those of us not too thick to hear the difference," Regulus said impassively. "And Harry is not the bothersome one here."

“Oh, but he is—"

“It’s you, Sirius, you utter pest. Leave me alone."

"Leave you alone? With him?" Sirius scowled, gripping Regulus tighter when he tried to squirm away. "You shouldn't spend time with people like him, Reg. He might shock your sensibilities."

"If anything is so crude as to 'shock my sensibilities', it's you," Regulus snapped. He shifted, ducking out from under Sirius’s arm, and the moment Sirius tried to grab him again, Regulus reacted faster: he grabbed Sirius by the wrist and yanked his arm down. “Leave us alone.”

Sirius stared at his arm, gaping for a moment, as though the idea that his younger brother could actually hold him back was incomprehensible. But he caught himself and shut his jaw, pulling his arm back. Regulus was quick to let him go, and just as quick to try and turn away.

“I’m just trying to look after you.”

Sirius sounded honestly hurt, and Harry studied him curiously. There was no saying that Sirius didn’t care for his younger brother, he just had an awfully strange way of showing it.

Sirius caught Harry looking and scowled, jabbing a finger towards him. “He’s not the type of person you—"

Suddenly Regulus was flushing a deep red and swinging back around, slapping Sirius’s arm down with a snarl, as angry as Harry had ever seen him. “You lost the right to say anything about the sort of people I associate with the moment you left home. You’re not a Black anymore. You’re nothing.”

“We’re still brothers!” Sirius exclaimed, eyes wide—though his voice was forceful, and his brow furrowed. “Mother’s stupid tapestry can’t—she can’t change that—”

“No, Mother can’t. But I can. And I say you stopped being my brother six months ago. Come on, Harry, we don’t have to listen to this.”

“Reg—"

“He’s my friend, Sirius No-Name.” Regulus sneered. “Someone who respects me. Someone I care about. The more you run around trying to act like you can control me, like I owe you anything, the more I value people who actually listen.” He spun around, taking Harry by the elbow and nudging
him towards the next set of stairs. “Let’s go.”

Harry glanced once more towards Sirius, but he wasn’t about to stick around to try and comfort the Gryffindor, no matter how the obfuscus twisted his heart aching and head pounding at even looking back. He followed as Regulus stormed down the stairs, lingering a few steps behind, letting him cool off. Harry had seen Regulus lose his cool before, when Severus had annoyed him—but yelling in the halls? It was difficult to connect that with the image of control he usually presented to the world.

But no matter how he tried to disguise it, no matter how he acted, Regulus was still a boy. He was almost a year younger than Harry, and he’d never been on his own the way Harry had, nor needed to take care of himself the way Severus had, and while Harry was certain Regulus had faced some of the world’s hard truths, he was still just a kid. Hell, even Harry—

They were all just kids, weren’t they? Kids bickering among themselves, playing protagonist in their own little fantasies, until someone like Voldemort came along and—

And left them to the Dementors.

And killed them.

The bell hadn’t rung yet, so the doors of the Great Hall were still shut when they arrived at the landing. Regulus glanced around, noting a few other students lingering halfway up the main stair—Hufflepuff-yellow scarves, but Harry didn’t recognize them—and turned into the nook under the side stairs they had come down. There was a tall window there, and Regulus grabbed the latch and flung it open, letting in a gust of icy air; it had begun to snow again that morning, and now the flakes were landing and melting in Regulus’s hair. The boy didn’t seem to mind, or to notice at all, his face stiff and eyes unblinking.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked quietly, trying to ignore the gooseflesh on his arms.

Regulus sighed, and all the rigidness in his face and spine seemed to shatter, and he closed his eyes as he slumped back. The hand at his side was still clenched tight, though: the knuckles white as the snow coming in. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” he said, speaking just as softly as Harry had. “I wish he wouldn’t give you trouble.”

“I think he’s made to cause trouble,” Harry pointed out, but he paused, trying to think through his words before he made things worse. “He… It doesn’t really bother me that much, you know. It’s actually kind of amusing. He’s really easy to talk in circles. He doesn’t like to think about what he’s doing.”

Regulus smiled weakly, and took another deep breath. The red in his face had retreated, and now it was just his ears and his nose splotched with pink from the cold. He opened his eyes again and closed the window, but his hand lingered on the latch, and his eyes lingered on his hand. When he spoke again, his voice was even softer, barely loud enough for Harry to hear it.

“Maybe it’s better we’ll be on opposite sides of the war.”

Harry opened his mouth, but—

What could he say? He stared at Regulus, at the stillness of his face, caught just so in the window light. How long had that thought been stewing, waiting to be voiced? Was it an impulse, a sudden stroke of burning judgement, or the crystallization, thoughts slowly freezing in the empty gap left in a neglected brother’s heart?

The bell rang, and with a groan the doors of the Great Hall scraped across the floor. Above, the
classrooms began to open up, and there was the sound of eager voices and feet on the stairs, and Harry could feel the other students descending like waterfalls down the various staircases, headed their way. Regulus pulled his hand away from the latch, and as Harry watched settled into his usual pleasant mask, his back straightening and the features of his face smoothening.

“So?” Regulus asked, voice alien in it’s brightness. “Are you planning to attend the rally? I really hope you will; it’s always good to know you have people you can trust on your side.”

As he smiled, Harry felt his own spirits darkening. Reg was… It was wrong. He shouldn’t be going to the rallies. It wasn’t Harry’s place to say so any more than it was Sirius’s, but…

“I’ll be there,” he said lowly. “But I don’t think I can go with you. I’ve been informed there are… particular arrangements for my attendance.”

Regulus tilted his head, but if there were any true thoughts about what Harry had said they were hidden away under that vacuous mask. “Alright,” he said pleasantly. “Perhaps I will see you there. Until then?”

Harry nodded, and Regulus turned out of the nook, hurrying towards the beginnings of the crowd flowing into the Great Hall. Before he’d even reached the doors, he’d been set upon by friends, who he greeted cheerfully, no sign that he’d been livid just minutes before. Harry doubted any of the group surrounding him could have guessed he’d been fighting with his brother... and he wasn't sure how many of them even knew if was something that Regulus would get so worked up about, either. Harry may not have known Regulus for as long or as well as they did, but he knew that Regulus rarely let his smile slip. Somehow it seemed like he was more interested in playing pureblood with his regular friends, whereas with Harry—with Severus, really, who Harry was probably in this matter essentially an extension of—he didn't feel the need to keep up the pretenses.

Harry frowned at the group all wearing their fake smiles as they disappeared into the Great Hall, spite swelled suddenly in his chest. Did any of them know about what Regulus was going through, with his brother abandoning him like that, with the temptation of Voldemort looming on the horizon? A few of them might know about the rally, but would any of them actually go, kept at their parents' elbows? Were any of them being coaxed into a war, at sixteen? Harry doubted it. It was mostly seventh years who had gone before, like Avery and Mulciber, and none of them had been under so tight a leash as Regulus had been.

But... there were other kids, Regulus's age and younger, who Voldemort had under his thumb. And—

There it was again—Mael screaming at them not to leave, arms stretched through the bars—the plague of Harry's decent dreams. Harry shuddered, goosebumps prickling up his arms, a chill curling in his chest that wasn't from the lingering air let in through the window. It was so easy to replace Mael with Regulus, and himself, as Emil, with Sirius, and imagine the despair that must have been written on Regulus's face when he realized his brother was abandoning him again...

_Maybe it’s better we’ll be on opposite sides of the war_, Regulus had said. Would it be any different, if they were together?

Harry urged himself forward, joining the crowd bottlenecking as it surged into the hall, letting the uncomfortable press of the other students’ magic and the overwhelming smells of lunch fill his mind. He sat by himself at the end of the Ravenclaw table, dishing portions of fruits and vegetables and potatoes and meat onto his plate before he realized his appetite had left him entirely. The chicken, especially, looked strangely unappetizing; he'd never been a particularly picky eater, but now it made him feel sick to imagine chewing it and having it turn to tasteless mush in his mouth.
Instead, he pulled out his book again, and tried to focus on that. Quora may have had his own ends in terrorizing him with it, but the book more broadly covered the lasting influences of the Roman Conquest of Britain. Aside from the bits about sex and Time Turners, it was both fascinating and safely distant from his own situation, and he quickly lost himself in the pages.

According to the book—and Harry was taking it with an ocean of salt, knowing who had given it to him—before the Romans had conquered Britain, magical people had lived entirely integrated in general society. Techniques were passed down through matriarchal family lines, and it was rare for any witch to share her secrets with another. In fact, it had originally been preferable for marriage to be between a magical and a non-magical, as then there would be no risk of losing family secrets to other families. The idea of pure-bloodedness had only come about way down the line, by this author’s word, closer to medieval times than antiquity—only—

He’d wondered earlier why Quora would have given him a book detailing that. If you knew anything about Voldemort, it was that he was the symbol of extremist blood purism, and Quora was…

So he’d read onwards, looking for answers. Though to an extent magicals continued to interact with their local communities after the coming of the Romans, it was historically clear that there was a huge shift before and after their influence—or, at least, that’s how the Romans recorded it, and the author seemed to accept those limited records at face value. Thus: Prior to the influx of Roman influence, British witches and wizards dealt only in potions and ritual magics. When the legions came, they brought with them wizards, and these wizards were eager to share their own word-based spell casting, as it was the Roman practice to take the practices of an area and translate them into the common form for their own use, and then convert the locals into using those practices instead, as a way of "Romanizing" even these far edges of the empire. Roman magic was at it’s best an amalgamation of transmutation and transformation from Egypt, healing practices and divination from Greece, household wards and curses from France and Germany, and so forth. With the introduction of the wand and seemingly boundless possibilities of a new form of magic to Britain, where magic had before been used mainly for cures and remedies, the people there latched quickly onto these new, broader forms.

The rapid shift in their powers was noted and scorned by their non-magical neighbors, and as quickly as they began to practice the new forms, witches and wizards took to hiding them away. Either they kept to their roles as local doctors and kept secret or abandoned their Roman practices, maintaining the traditional roles they always had, or they sought for the first time to form villages of their own with other magic users. Though it was over a thousand years and several dramatic shifts in the shape of the world before the Statute of Secrecy was agreed upon and formally separated magical society from the muggles, the beginnings could be found in those early days.

Or, at least, according to the book. The author seemed stuck on portraying all of these early magic users as being weak-willed and traitorous to their people, her words bearing judgement even though she had so far not directly voiced it. And her use of citations was less than precise.

Still. He was several paragraphs deep into a tangential discussion of the impact on Ireland—Hibernia, she called it, never conquered by the Roman Empire but affected by trade and the cultural shift of their neighbors, even more so among the magicals, who with the Roman’s introducing longer-distance apparition could travel between the islands much quicker—when he felt the familiar magic of Pandora, first, and Hector as they descended the stairs outside the hall. He was easy to spot, at the end of the table, and though he did not look up when they sat down, Hector beside him and Pandora across, they did not seem to mind, caught up in their own argument as they were.

It was, however, difficult to tune them out and read at the same time, though he did his best. There
was a reason he preferred the kitchens, and this was a good part of it. Less than the part the headache all this magic caused played, and certainly less than his friendship with Hani, but it was still a part. People were difficult, after all. Even if you were clearly minding your own business, engrossed in a book and not looking for conversation—

“Come on, back me up, Harry?”

“Mmhmm,” he mumbled, trying not to lose track of the sentence he’d started.

“You’re muggle-raised. You know they aren’t—there’s no way we could get enough wizards on a spaceship for it to be useful!”

Harry looked up. Spaceships? Damn it—he’d lost his place. Lorcaín mac Donaill, Lorcaín—there it was...

“Then we’ll make a bigger one,” Pandora insisted. “Honestly, Hector, you’ve got to dream a bit bigger.”

“There’s just so many problems here, Pan. First, you can’t just ‘make it bigger’, or it won’t be able to get off the ground, let alone break atmosphere. Second, it doesn’t matter how big you make it, it’s food that’s the problem. Fourth—third? Yeah—there’s no way putting wizards on the ship won’t make the machinery go wonky, and if there is any failure at all, everyone on the ship will either freeze or suffocate. Magic won’t be useful, and it will potentially get everyone killed. And, not to mention, we have no idea what happens to magic users who leave earth. Elementary theory, Pan. Magic is bound to the—”

“I’m not saying it will work now,” Pandora said. “I’m saying we should investigate it, is all. I’m saying that if we don’t pursue it, we don’t know even know what we stand to gain, if are too afraid to take the risk.”

“And I’m saying leave it to the muggles. Their science has much more to gain than we do. And probably anything that could be gained would be ruined by the fact that wizards refuse to follow logical experimental practices—”

“Harry agrees with me, don’t you Harry?”

“Uh-huh,” he said absently, pushing his thumb against the corner of the pages.

“Harry, this is a matter of the next great leap in magic! The advancement into our next age!”

Harry severely doubted that, but he wasn’t about to ruin Pandora’s enthusiasm with his experience in the future. “Right,” he said, setting aside his book. “So. Spaceships?”

“Sure,” said Pandora. “I’ve heard muggles have already set foot on the moon. That we of magic—discounting, of course, creatures; we can’t speak for their histories—that we haven’t managed that much is a laughable fault. Imagine, the ways astrology could progress—”

“Astrology?” Harry cut her off. He didn’t like where this was going.

“Yes. To be closer to the stars, more directly observe their patterns…”

“Okay, wait—wait, Pandora…” Harry looked around quickly, and grabbed off his plate a grape and a pea, holding them up. “This,” he indicated the grape, “is the earth, and this is the moon. The universe—well, everyone here is a star. With me so far?”
“So you’re the sun?” Hector prompted.

“I—sure. I’m the sun.”

Pandora beamed. “Oh, yes, that—that makes sense, Harry, I’ll have to—”

“Wait,” Harry commanded, trying not to groan. A bit of fiddling and he got a grain of salt balanced on the grape, and Harry managed to hold up his model again without upsetting it. “That’s a wizard. Well, that’s actually probably closer to the whole of the wizarding population. One grain of salt on the very large earth, right?”

“Okay,” said Pandora. “And you’re the sun. Holding the whole world up.”

“What? Ugh. Forget about me being the sun. Just say—you’re a galaxy nearby. Er…”

“Andromeda,” Hector supplied.

“Yes. Okay. You’re Andromeda. This is all wizarding Earth, got it?”

“I am Andromeda?” Pandora questioned. “This is not exactly aligning mythologically—”

“Hypothetically, Pandora,” Hector explained.

“Oh!” She brightened. “I understand.”

He’d gotten this far… “Now, say we do get wizards to the moon—”

“Or witches.”

“Sure. Whatever. Will you do the honors?”

Pandora, luckily, moved the grain of salt from the grape to the pea without making a hassle of it.

“Alright,” Harry said. “You’re still the Andromeda, and wizards are, what, a few centimeters closer? It doesn’t really make a difference at all, does it?”

“It makes all the difference,” Pandora disagreed, pointing delicately to the grain of salt. “We’re on the moon.”

“Yes, but relatively speaking the change in location is hardly enough to really say the grain of salt is actually closer to you, or more capable of understanding you.”

“Relatively speaking, the grain of salt just made a huge journey, and while in the eyes of great giants such as us the movement may be inconsequential, it is the perspective of the grain of salt that truly matters.”

Harry this time could not hold back his groan. She wasn’t trying to be troublesome, he knew, but it was clearly in her nature.

“It’s moved further from me, though,” Hector pointed out. “Whereas on the grape it was balanced, on the pea it is closer to you. And how is the salt supposed to know which is more important to know?”

“But if it were really the moon, the pea would be orbiting the grape, and both—”

Harry sighed and let the pea fall back on the plate, tossing grape into his mouth and picking up his
book again. Ravenclaws. How he had ended up in this house, he would never know—nor would he understand why his action made Pandora shriek.

“Harry! You just ate Earth!”

He shrugged. “Turned into a black hole, I suppose. And then time stopped making sense anyways, ‘cause physics gets a little hand-wavey at that point. Or maybe it’s the seventies, and I’m not sure why we’re talking wizards in space when that’s supposed to be in the 2000s, at least.”

The were both looking at him blankly, so he just held up his book more pointedly. He had no clue where science fiction actually was at this point, since his understanding it was based off years of poorly remembered glances snuck at his relative’s telly. It was so impossibly distant…

He felt numb. Their argument resumed, but Harry stayed out of it, and tried to focus on his book, and when the first bell rang, he quickly said goodbye to his two friends. They had Care of Magical Creatures to get to, and Harry didn't envy them—the snow covering the grounds had finally started to thaw the week before, but that just meant that every night there was freshly melted water to freeze on the paths the groundskeeper had shovelled, and on top of that was a fresh snowfall which, if the enchanted ceiling in the Great Hall was anything to go by, only seemed to be getting worse. He turned instead to climb the stairs to the third floor.

A few of the second years, knowing where he was heading, were quick to surround him. The usual structure of their Tuesdays, wherein while half had Defense while the other half struggled through History, had been set aside for a full double-block of Defense. Harry let their energy carry him, not having any of his own, and echoed the smiles of their enthusiasm, knowing that he would have been just as excited for this sort of lesson if not for who Quora was. Under different circumstances...

But circumstances were what they were. The second-years, eager with their chatter, did not seem to notice that Harry was only half-listening; he was merely a convenient symbol to them, not really an actual human at all. Students had the tendency to forget that their teachers were people with their own lives beyond the classroom, and for Harry, who they only saw once a week, that applied doubly. It didn't matter whether it was him or any of the other upper years who TA'd the class; his identity was inconsequential. He had no real impact on any of their lives, being him—not the way Quora did.

He wondered, stepping into the large hall that Quora had cleared for the class to use at spotting the Defense professor across the room, whether or not anything he did had any impact at all, really. Did it matter that he tried so hard not to impact the past? Not to destroy the future? If he had been someone important—Dumbledore or Voldemort or someone like that—sure, they might have been able to impact the way things played out. But what was he but a barely of-age wizard of no real importance…? What could he really hope to achieve?

Quora beckoned him over, and Harry shook his head, clearing away those thoughts, and everything else, while he was at it. If it was the case that he was of no impact, he should value it: he wouldn't have to worry when he found a way home. But he could not operate on that assumption. In any case, he would carry on doing his best to protect who he could, and find his way home as quickly as possible.

"Are you ready, Mr. Harrigan?" Quora asked as he approached.

The man was dressed in his tight-armed dueling robes, which seemed to have some basic enchantments on them—nothing that Harry was interested in, though.

"Ready, sir?"
"You are not... distracted?" The man raised an eyebrow pointedly. "Everything is in working order? I would rather not have you, ah—how did you put it?—'zoning out' in the middle of our demonstration."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek. Everything was fine, everything was fine... "Unless you're planning to do something dangerous, I should be fine," he said, as seriously as he could muster. "And I think I would have bigger problems to worry about at that point."

Quora let the tiniest of smiles quirk the corners of his mouth—rare when he was on display as the stoic Defense Professor in front of so many. Not that the Second Years were particularly observant, but... it still made Harry nervous. He stiffened slightly, and resisted the back away; it would only give Quora satisfaction... or an excuse to be angry, depending on his mood. Through the tight constraints he used to mask his magic, there was only so much Harry could read on him.

Before either could say anything more, the final bell rang. Quora pivoted sharply about, climbing the steps to the raised platform at the front of the room in stiff strides, his spine rigid and proud. The room was not unlike the Defense classroom or Quora's office; like many of the rooms at Hogwarts the front portion was elevated slightly to look out on the bulk of the room. Here, however, combined with the structure of the room, the platform felt like the dais of a chapel, from which he could preach out to his flock. There was even stained glass in the vaulted ceiling, starting at the second level, but Harry couldn't tell what it was meant to depict. If there had been some pattern or image there, it had been lost to the damages of time and countless repairs, bits here and there clearly newer, their colors brighter and not matching the surrounding dusky tints. Through them, the light from outside, already strained through the clouds, was diffused further, and it fell instead to three chandeliers and the tall windows along one long wall to keep the room well lit.

Quora cleared his throat, and the second-years were quick to quiet down. They pressed a bit closer to the stage Quora looked down on them from—not too close, but closer—making it clear when one figure lingered in the doorway. Harry squinted—it was Flitwick. A moment later, Professor McGonagall joined him, but neither made any move to come inside.

When he was satisfied with their approach and the volume of the room, Quora nodded and spoke, his level, almost monotonous voice just loud enough to echo slightly. "Good afternoon," he began shortly. "As you are all well aware, today we begin our introduction to practical defense, in which I will impress upon you what it actually looks like to defend yourself. I have heard your excitement in the halls, but I will repeat it again: this is not dueling. There will be no forms to follow, and the rules I put in place will merely be for practicalities sake. The intention is to train you not in sport, but to think on your feet.

He paused, his eyes flickering over the students, notably to the Gryffindors clustered on the left, the Slytherins on the right, and up, to the two professors lurking in the doorway. "Nor is what you learn here to be put into practice by picking fights, as Professor McGonagall has asked me to remind you. This is Defense class, not a dueling tutorial. We teach you not so that you can recklessly attack, but so that when you find yourself in danger, you avoid the worst of pitfalls. You do not freeze. You act. You think. You get yourself to safety.

"After that, Gryffindors, you may examine whether you can actually be of any use to end a fight before jumping back in. And it is learning to act on instinct, Ravenclaws, because stopping and trying to analyze before you are out of harm’s way is a surefire way to leave yourself exposed. Vulnerable.

"And you, Slytherins—the goal is not to cause damage, or exact revenge against those who dare act against you. Blood for blood is all well and good, until it gets you killed. The goal is not violence. It
is defense. It is keeping yourself alive and whole, Hufflepuffs, so that if you need to help someone who cannot help themselves, you’re ready and capable. You cannot help if you are yourself incapacitated.”

He gazed coolly down on the students, letting the somber silence take hold. It was undeniable that he had a gift, to hold the younger students attentions—even the Lockhart kid for once seemed to look serious. Harry would think that sort of boy would prefer the showmanship of dueling, rather than the sort of Defense that Quora aimed to teach them. If he did, it did not show now.

After a moment, Quora shifted, and the tension seemed to release. "That being said, our practice has no reason not to be enjoyable." In his dry tone, it seemed almost ironic, but his eyes did seemed to glint a bit, and he leaned forward, the crowd unknowingly mirroring his posture. So easily he commanded them. "The thrill—some of you know it from Quidditch, or whatever sports are fashionable these days. I advise those who do find these classes enjoyable to consider looking into proper dueling, that they may practice it regularly and in a controlled environment. Perhaps a club, in some future year? I've heard there have been those in the past, when interest has been high. You have a champion dueler on the premises in Professor Flitwick. Perhaps you can talk him into something?"

He nodded to the back, and the students turned at the distraction, some of them giggling as Flitwick blushed mightily. In the moment's distraction, Quora motioned for Harry to join him, and he swallowed his remaining misgivings about the whole situation and came forward. There were wards layered around the dais, which rippled as he passed through. It was cousin to the null ward, in a way: the wards Quora had erected were designed to absorb any stray spells that might travel out. The null ward was less powerful, but blocked a good amount of magic going both out and in. It did, however, provide some relief from the magic of the excited second years, and he was glad: even if this was just a demonstration, he would rather not face Quora with any sort of distraction.

"Mr. Harrigan and I will now demonstrate what a fight might look like," Quora said firmly, drawing the students attention back to himself. "Mr. Harrigan's goal is simply to keep himself as safe as possible for as long as possible. As the attacker—myself—is in this instance a superior fighter, he must think on his feet, doing whatever it takes to keep himself safe, without taking any unnecessary risks, but also hopefully slowing me down. Watch carefully. Do not get caught up in how cool —"

He drawled the word, some of the Hufflepuffs giggling at the sound of it with his dry intonation. "—something is. Think. Analyze." He paused, and turned to face Harry. "Mr. Harrigan?"

As they drew their wands, the giggles quickly died away, but they were replaced by whispering. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see some of the Slytherins and Ravenclaws eyeing him speculatively. Making bets, no doubt—Harry ignored them, focusing solely on Quora, shifting to a lighter position on his feet and gripping his wand all the tighter.

The man gave him a short bow. Had they been alone, Harry had no doubt it would have been paired with a mocking smile. If this were really a fight, it was only someone of Quora's abominable self-confidence who would waste time with a bow.

Quora wasted no time, and did not let Harry stand idle and ready. He threw three stunners in short succession, stupefies with their red light piercing through the air. Harry responded just as quickly, summoning a protego to catch them while he jumped away to the side, weaving his steps around the stinging hex that followed. Once Quora started, he did not hesitate, stringing together chains of spells with the practiced ease that only years of dueling could provide.

Harry recognized some of the forms—he had read about them, but had never put them into practice himself. Chain spells were a concept he had examined previously, and spoken with Flitwick about.
The wand motions of the first spell were complementary to those in the second, so there would be no
break and the motion of casting one after the other would be fluid. If Harry were a practiced dueler,
he would have an equally formulaic defense already worked out to all of the offensive chains he
knew, a counter-strike ready and waiting to turn the tides. Dueling in that sense was a dance of call
and response, where each side was hoping to be more learned in chains that the other did not know,
and, failing that, able to outlast or overpower the opponent into making a mistake.

Harry wasn't a dueler, and this was not a duel. Quora's chains were not an attempt to mimic that
form, but clearly so ingrained by practice that they were instinctual. Harry did not have that
advantage. He could only respond, as quickly as he could.

He did, however, have some tricks up his sleeve. There was his magemetry. He had a heightened
sense of where Quora's magic was at any given moment, beyond what he could see or hear, and as
most wizards did not have that, if Quora wanted to trick him he would have to slow down his
onslaught to adjust his strategy. Combined with Harry's quick reflexes, he could dodge more spells,
knowing exactly what shape the magic was taking, and thus save his own casting for when he really
needed it.

He also—somewhat surprisingly—had occlumency. It seemed like that was what was happening, at
least; he wasn’t sure how else he could explain it. There was Quora, one of the most terrifying
wizards Harry would ever face, throwing spells at him with the intent on hitting him. That should be
frightening. There were days that Harry could barely stand to be in the same room with Quora
without shaking in his boots, and yet... maybe there was some part of him still screaming to run
away, but it had been locked up tight behind several walls. No, Harry's mind felt open, clear,
untroubled by thoughts. He was focused only on the present, and keeping himself clear of any of
Quora's attacks.

But there was a point at which Quora was, quite simply, the superior fighter. Harry winced as a
stinging hex struck his ankle, and rolled to dodge a spell in white following overhead, which meant
he had to cast a *protego* as there was no way he could get up quickly enough to dodge whatever
Quora's next attack would be. He kept low, powering the shield with a bit more energy than he
would have normally, withstanding a number of spells until Quora took the bait and charged up for
something more powerful.

The moment he did, Harry jumped aside, flinging an *expelliarmus* the Professor's way. His first
attack. The man easily dodged, but it marked a shift in the conflict. Harry, relying on his ability to
stay in motion, began to throw his own spells to counter the Professor's attacks. A stunner towards
his head—deflected off one of Quora’s, but followed by a tripping hex towards Quora’s knees—but
then he was jumping aside to dodge a spell that split mid-air into three blue beams, each crackling
with an energy that made Harry expect they would have frozen him if they landed—and it only took
a flick of the wand for Quora to deflect a bat-bogey hex—

For all Harry’s efforts, however, Quora seemed hardly disturbed. And it was the sheer amount of
magic the man had at his command that really did Harry in—both in terms of force (though perhaps
control was the more accurate aspect), and the vastness of his repertoire of spells. Harry had quick
reflexes and an empty mind, but Quora could follow up a standard curse with a conjuration—a flock
of birds flying in his face one moment, rocks breaking free from the stone dais to get underfoot the
next. And while Harry could use these objects against Quora—he threw one of the rocks, at least,
only a fortunate bit of aiming preventing a spell from striking him as he rolled over his wand arm—
mostly they just added confusion to the field. And Quora knew spells Harry had no idea how to deal
with. Like the barrier that appeared all around him, which might have turned his own spell against
him had Harry not been attuned to the magic and noticed it so quickly.
What a cruel way to kill someone, Harry thought, to turn their own magic against them. And Quora, he would lord it so. For the masses: he but the innocent bystander, defending himself. For those he counted as his: evidence of the hubris of those who would dare try to best him. And for the victim—

Quora wasn’t waiting around for Harry to analyze his character. He slashed his wand through the air; Harry didn’t know the spell but he leapt away, his wand already flying in a pattern he’d read about once, drawing up from the ground a wall for him to duck behind, closing off a triangle around him with an angular protego—which solidified just in time for Harry to catch the end of Quora’s spell as it collided with the wards, the magic rippling and making Harry’s heart stutter. He staggered back, finding something solid behind him, and startled to look—

— his hands grabbing at the cupboard door, bracing his feet on either side of it, pulling and pulling because on the other side—

The headache was sudden, and splitting, but it had him pulling away from the wall just in time for another spell come and strike it with such force it began to shatter, but not before Harry had snapped his occlumency back into place and, with a sweep of his wand and probably more power than necessary, pulled the protego around to catch Quora’s next spell, sending it ricocheting away. That was his opponent—there, in front of him, his magic rippling against its boundaries and his eyes alight with something that mirrored the blood running so very hot in Harry’s own veins—Harry jumped back, twisting from another spell, and forgot everything else, everything else but that sudden anger, seeing Quora. There was no time to be spent elsewise, not when he was so easily kept on his toes—if he wanted to wipe that smirk off Quora’s face, he would have to—

The final blow came as Harry risked another stupefy. Quora stepped neatly around it, and, with a sharp jab, sent several of the scattered stones flying towards Harry, magic drawing them towards him like a magnet, and then caught Harry with his own expelliarmus as he fell back in an effort to avoid the strike. It wasn’t a powerful rendition of the disarming spell, but it grabbed his wand quickly and delivered it to Quora’s hand, and the magic on the stones dissolved.

It took a moment for Harry to hear past the the rapid pulse of blood in his ears to realize that the second years were clapping. Harry glanced at them, wondering what on earth they were... and belatedly gave a weak smile—he’d almost forgotten this was a demonstration. Quora stepped forward and offered Harry a hand up, returning his wand when he was on his feet.

"Too risky," the man said quietly, though he did not seem particularly bothered.

"If we’d actually been fighting, you’d have gotten me far sooner," Harry pointed out, trying to pretend his breathing was as even as Quora’s, trying not to snatch his hand away, trying to pretend he hadn’t lost track of the moment. "And it would have been pretty boring for them if I’d just spent the next half-hour on the run, don’t you think?"

"Perhaps."

Quora turned away, addressing the students again, and Harry retreated back a bit, leaning against the wall off to the side of the dias he’d been waiting at before. His heart was still pounding, but it was... it was out of exhilaration, not fear. It was almost—dare he think it?—enjoyable, going against Quora like that. Of course the man was a much better dueler than Harry was. Perhaps than he ever would be—and if he were actually fighting with dark intent, Harry wasn’t sure who beyond Dumbledore would really stand much of a chance against him. But in these controlled circumstances, where Quora was clearly toning it down to give Harry something of a chance to participate... facing someone that much better than Harry was a challenge that he couldn’t help but...

Maybe ‘enjoy’ wasn’t the right word. Maybe he wasn’t—
“Mr. Harrigan,” said Flitwick, and Harry looked up to find the charms professor approaching him, Professor McGonagall a few steps behind.

“Professors,” Harry replied, quickly straightening up and tucking his wand away.

“That was quite a show, Harry,” Flitwick said excitedly, quickly dropping all pretenses of formality. “Professor Quora had asked me to come on standby, in case you weren’t up to the challenge, but it is clear the precaution was unnecessary.”

Harry blinked. “Oh, well… that’s too bad,” he said. “It would have been more interesting to see the two of you go at it, I mean, sir. The students would have really gotten to see something, then.”

“No, no—not at all, Harry!” Flitwick was shaking his head so hard he might have fallen over. “After all, this is what the lesson is about!”

“I, too, would have enjoyed watching a duel between you and Professor Quora, Filius,” McGonagall said. “But you are right, of course. As he said, this is not a dueling lesson—thank Merlin. This is a lesson in practical defense. Seeing someone like you, by which I mean a fellow student, clearly not a duelist, Mr. Harrigan, the students get a more practical demonstration of what they may hope to achieve.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I guess that makes sense. I’m just glad I was able to last as long as I did.”

“You are rather gifted in the art of dodging.” Coming from McGonagall—who was eying him with her usual coolness, even as she spoke, that was high praise… unless, like Sirius, she was mocking him with that ‘cowardly’ skill. “Did your former teacher impress that on to you?”

Harry frowned. She was difficult for him to make sense of; from the first time they had met, when she had demanded to know why Harry had taken down the Fat Lady’s portrait from Gryffindor Tower, she had always looked at him with a very clear sort of skepticism. And then there was the time she’d tried to stop him from going to Hogsmeade, on Sirius’s tip… he wasn’t sure what she wanted from him now. She didn’t seem like the sort of person who would strike up conversation without a goal in mind—though she was Gryffindor, not Slytherin.

“I’ve always had fast reflexes,” he said simply, hoping she wouldn’t push the matter. She didn’t get a chance—Flitwick was too enthusiastic.

“Fast reflexes and a level head, a good combination for a duelist!” the man said eagerly. “Tell me, Harry—have you ever considered joining a dueling club? We don’t have one in the school, currently, of course, but there are plenty of student-age rings that run during the summer, and adult clubs that compete year-round.”

“I… can’t say I have. Before coming here I wasn’t really, um, involved in magical society at all,” Harry said. It wasn’t precisely the truth, but the sentiment was basically the same: until just now, he hadn’t ever considered how wizards went about practicing dueling as a sport. He’d read about dueling strategies, but the books he’d found interesting had never gone into the teams and clubs.

“Well, perhaps next summer, or after you graduate, hm?” Flitwick said, undeterred. “You’d have the knack for it, I think… I could put in a good word…”

“He might put those instincts to something more purposeful than a hobby,” McGonagall countered. “The aurors, perhaps? They are always looking for worthwhile candidates…”

The aurors? Harry frowned. He’d never really considered that route… and now, with Quora trying to sink his talons into him, he couldn’t imagine it could ever really be an option. Not that it mattered,
anyways: until he found his way back to the nineties, his only career path would be into research.

Flitwick didn’t take kindly to dueling being reduced to a ‘hobby’, if his immediate protestations were anything to go by. Harry cleared his throat. “I don’t think I’m cut out for the aurors, Professor,” he said plainly. “I’m hoping for a position at the OMRL, anyways, if they have me.”

“The Research Library?” McGonagall’s eyes widened a bit, but she also frowned. “That is… Well, exciting as the possibility there is, quite frankly, Mr. Harrigan, you have power waiting to be unleashed. That *immobulus* you cast… not anyone could have done that, Mr. Harrigan. Are you really willing to let that go to waste as a mere librarian?”

“Come now, Minnie!” Flitwick chuckled. “You were very nearly a Ravenclaw, you’ve told me before! Surely you can understand the call to the quiet, bookish life.”

“And you were very nearly a Gryffindor, and you *are* a duelist,” McGonagall countered. “You of all Ravenclaws should appreciate the call to action, Filius!”

Harry blinked, surprised to find the two professors suddenly glaring at one another. He didn’t think they were arguing about him, anymore, especially since when Quora waved him over neither really acknowledged his escape.

The next ten minutes saw the second years lining up and learning a simple paintball hex. Harry could see McGonagall’s eye twitching as the students giggled with glee, splashing paint all over the floors and walls. It did not last long, the color disappearing as the ‘paint’ dried, but even Harry could see the potential for hallway pranks.

As soon as the majority of the students had mastered the spell, Quora set Harry to getting the stragglers caught up while he paired up the rest of the students and set them firing the paintball spell at each other. There were around thirty, maybe forty second years, so it made for a more chaotic experience than when Quora had done similar things with the regular split classes. The Professor, of course, was entirely unruffled by the spells flying everywhere. He set some sort of shield over himself that redirected the spells to curve around him, and waltzed easily from student to student, barely even paying attention when a paintball went flying past his head.

Harry didn't know what that shield was, but he didn't have it, and after the demonstration he was tired. Even with his magemetry and reflexes, as he re-introduced the stragglers to the group (careful to pair Lockhart with another Ravenclaw boy rather than any of the Hufflepuff girls) he found himself in the line of fire more than once. Soon his robe was covered with wet splotches, color showing up chalky against the black.

Despite the chaos—and the buzz of magic in his ears—Harry couldn't help but laugh along with the students as they thrilled in the lesson. He wasn't sure if Quora's goal was really achievable with this sort of teaching method, but he was glad to see the kids laughing. He even found he was able to give a few of the more hesitant students encouragement to break out of their reserved shells and enjoy the game Quora had made of it, and that was only just more satisfying than watching the few that played quidditch approaching the drill with an intensity unsuited to their twelve-year-old faces but inspiring nonetheless.

At the hour, Quora called their attention again and gave the class a break. After, he announced, there would be a tournament, the winner of which would get a night off homework, or extra credit if they did both.

Harry smiled as he watched the second years burble with excitement, breaking into smaller groups, mostly by house, but retreated to where he'd left his bag by the dais, away from the hubbub.
McGonagall and Flitwick had left during the practice. It wasn't a surprise when Quora, after answering a few pressing questions from the most eager of the students, joined him.

"But you're pretty courageous, teaching your students a spell like that. You never know which ones are going to turn it on you."

"Oh, I know which ones," Quora said. “But Mr. Filch mentioned he needed a number of helpers this weekend, so it’s a favor, really."

Harry snorted. “Well, it’s their own fault if they get caught, I guess.”

That earned him a speculative eye. “You’re learning. From your time with the young Mr. Black, perhaps?”

*That* had Harry immediately on alert. “Regulus, you mean? I’d guess it would be Severus and his lot, but…”

“Hm. The rumor around the castle is that you are planning to go to Hogsmeade with Regulus for Valentine’s weekend.”

How on earth had that spread so quickly? It had been, what, two hours? “I said no,” Harry pointed out. “You already told me to leave the weekend open.”

And who would have spread it, anyways? Not Sirius, surely... He wouldn't want anyone to think his brother was spending Valentine's Day with 'that Harridan', after all.

"I did," Quora agreed. "However, if you were to go with someone, Mr. Black would be a good one for it."

Harry raised an eyebrow, treating Quora to an incredulous gaze. The man was many thing, but unintelligent was not one of them, so he had to know what he was suggesting. Regulus hadn't meant his invitation as a date, merely as a plan to get to the rally together, and Quora had probably worked that out on his own, but going to the Hogsmeade with anyone else over the Valentine's weekend...

Of course, Harry was technically going with Quora. After the man's insinuations and the much more... detailed explanations in the book he'd leant Harry, he didn't want to consider what people might think. Hopefully, nothing. Most people weren’t that twisted.

"Regulus is likely to become the head of the Black family," Quora went on, his voice dropping in volume until only Harry could have properly heard him. "As far as associates go, the likely head of a house as established as the Blacks' is an entirely advantageous one. And, of course, his mother has been so vocal in her desire for her son to swear himself to the Dark Lord."

Harry stiffened. "He's only sixteen,” he protested, thinking of the boy flushed from arguing with his brother earlier that day... and, inevitably, of other brothers...

*Don’t leave me!*

"Is sixteen too young for a boy to make up his own mind about things?" Quora questioned. "You were barely of age when you attended your first rally, if I recall correctly, and you did not seem to mind Regulus being there then."

"Neither of us should have been," Harry bit out. "But that's a... pretty terrible thing for a mother to say. Who would *want* her son to become a radicalized soldier for a violent extremist?"
Quora shot him a cool glance. "Perhaps. But you must understand, Dear Walburga has already had one son rebel from her control. She seems to think that by swearing himself to a Dark Lord, Regulus will be more likely to remain true to the family than Sirius did."

"He can't carry on the family if he's dead," Harry scoffed. "Or locked up in Azkaban."

"Yes, well..." Quora smiled slightly. "I do approve of Regulus, generally. And will find him more useful alive and pliable. I am sure that he will be a useful investment."

Harry's scowl darkened, but the next bell rang, and Quora turned and headed to address the class again. Harry didn't follow him. The second years, oblivious to the conversation that had taken place, were just as excited and enthusiastic as before, but Harry found he couldn't look at them. This was what Quora was here for, after all... sorting out which of these kids would be useful to him down the line, getting them trained up for him to indoctrinate or kill, as it pleased him.

The moment the bell rang, Harry was gone, not giving Quora a chance to corral him into another conversation of 'helpful advice'. He hurried out into the hall, the second years, for once not as excited about leaving their lesson as begging Quora to let them have another go of it, slow to follow, and no other classrooms in use in the area. His blood was pounding in his ears, and he was eager to get outside on the path to the greenhouses, for the same reason Regulus had been so quick to open the window earlier.

In his eagerness, he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings, or he would have had some warning before he was pulled of course and thrown into an empty room. He rolled on the floor and grabbed at his wand, spinning on heel as the door slammed shut—

Sirius, of course.

"I don't have time for this," Harry snapped, moving to pass the Gryffindor. "I've already listened to you enough for one day. You want to cause trouble? Go find some helpless kid in Slytherin to pick on, and do it while I'm in Herbology, so I don't have to—"

Sirius lunged at him as he tried to push forward, and while Harry was quick, Sirius snagged his robe and drew him forward, just to push him back again, into the classroom. Harry's eyes narrowed, and his grip tightened on his wand.

"What the fuck are you doing to my brother?" Sirius snarled, taking a step forward. He was at least six inches taller than Harry, and he was bristling with his shoulders hunched, his fury making his magic, already unstable, ripple out around him.

"What am I doing?" Harry retorted. "What do you think you're doing? If you listened to a thing Regulus said, you would know—"

"You don't ever tell me how to treat my little brother!" Sirius shouted. "You don't know a thing about him, or about me, or about our family, and you sure as hell don't have a right to get him into the kind of shit—"

"I don't 'get' Regulus into anything!" Harry may have been shorter, but he'd faced worse than Sirius—even his Uncle was a bigger threat, and he was a muggle. "Frankly, I don't know where you got
your ideas about me from. Because I dared step in front of you when you were doing something
despicably wrong? For Christ’s sake. No, you know what? There’s nothing that could justify the
way you treat me, or Regulus, for that matter. You're just an immature asshole who is afraid to admit
his brother wants nothing to do with him after he abandoned—"

The last of Sirius's control snapped, and his fist connected with Harry's nose, hard. Harry staggered
back, tripping over his own feet onto the floor, gasping at the bust of pain and tasting blood dripping
down his lips. His grip on his wand slipped, but it was like he had been knocked out of the moment
—all thoughts had emptied from his mind, and unlike the emptiness of the demonstration with
Quora, this time they took with them the notion of defending himself.

Sirius loomed over him, his hand, red spots blooming on the knuckles, darting down to grab Harry's
collar. He pulled Harry up a few inches, leaning down to spit in his face. "Stay away from my
brother," he repeated. "He's just a kid, and you and your Death Eater friends need to leave him
alone."

He spun on heel, and threw open the door, giving Harry a brief view of the second years streaming
past before he slammed it shut again. Harry was left scowling at the wood, but his attention was
quickly turned to pinching his nose. It didn't feel broken, but it was bleeding as badly as a bludger to
the face, and would probably be red and swollen for days.

"Tergeo," he grumbled, trying to get some of the sticky liquid off his robes. It did little good, as his
nose was still bleeding, and even pinched shut it was still dripping everywhere.

The worst thing about this? He couldn't even bring himself to disagree with what Sirius was doing. If
he were Regulus's older brother, he would probably have been just as aggressive in his attempts to
keep him safe from the Death Eaters—especially if what Quora said about Walburga Black was true.
Instead he was Regulus's friend, and they were only close because Regulus seemed to feel Harry
respected his choices. But if he could? He would do anything to keep the other kids safely out of
Voldemort's grasp. Especially Regulus, and especially Severus, who seemed deluded into thinking
he would earn respect in the ranks despite his status as a half-blood, something Harry thought was
uncharacteristically optimistic for someone like Severus Snape.

But what could Harry do about it? Despite what Sirius thought, he wasn't a Death Eater, and it was
taking all of his efforts to keep it that way. Even if he were, it wasn't as though he would have
Voldemort's respect, to, what, demand that he keep his friends out of the war? Dark Lords didn't
work that way.

By the time Harry managed to stagger to his feet, he could feel that the hallway outside had cleared,
and before he even reached the door the bell signalling the beginning of the next class was ringing.
Harry sighed and trudged along, searching for the nearest loo. There was one—it was a girl's room,
but it was Moaning Myrtle's haunt, so no one ever went in there. Not wanting to wait any longer, he
ducked inside, and turned the lock behind him.

Myrtle was, thankfully, absent. He staggered to the sinks and splashed icy water on his face,
watching it stain the porcelain basin diluted pink. When the worst of it was gone, he found the paper
towels and dried himself off, and then tried Tergeo on his robes again. It didn't do much, but at least
they were black. His head was pounding, but his nose had mostly stopped bleeding, but he washed
off the last trickle and hurried out. He was late to Herbology. Sprout may not have been as severe of
a teacher about that sort of thing as, say, McGonagall, but Harry didn't like calling attention to
himself. Maybe he'd be able to slip in unnoticed.

Unfortunately, when he opened the door to Greenhouse Six, it let in a blast of icy air that made the
closest students shriek. He closed it quickly, but the damage had been done. Everyone was staring at
"Mr. Harrigan!" Sprout exclaimed. "What in Merlin's name happened to you?"

Harry winced, realizing what he must look like. "Sorry for being late, Professor," he said meekly.

"Never mind that—do you need to go see Madame Pomfrey?"

Harry glanced around. Sirius was glaring at him with unbridled vitriol, like he didn’t even care if Harry ratted him out, but beside him, James was frowning. Pandora and Hector looked just as alarmed as Sprout did, and Severus—well, he was pale, but that probably wasn’t much of a clue as to what he thought.

“I’m alright, Professor,” he said, turning his gaze back to her. “I seem to have had a run-in with a wall. My fault for not looking where I was going. But no real lasting damage, I think. Nothing a shower won’t fix, though my robe will need a good soak…”

The Professor eyed him, as if trying to to decide whether or not it was worth it to try and push him for a real answer when he’d so clearly demonstrated his willingness to lie. After a moment, she sighed. “Well, alright, then… there’s a spot open by Mr. Rosier, there, join in…”

As Harry passed, he could hear Pettigrew’s snickering comments start up. “A run-in with something,” his reedy voice hissed. Lupin shushed him.

Even Rosier had words to say, much to Harry’s surprise. “Merlin, Harrigan,” he murmured, barely moving his mouth. “You know… Regulus did insinuate you might need back-up against someone in the castle, but I figured—”

“I’m fine,” Harry muttered, trying to sound firm. “It’s taken care of. Thank you, but… I told Regulus I didn’t need help.”

“Yes, well. Good luck convincing Severus of that.”

“Severus…?”

Rosier jerked his chin past Harry, jotting something in his notes. Harry frowned, but as looking would require an obvious twist of his body away from Professor Sprout, he brought out his own notebook and quill, hanging his bag off of one of the boards protruding from the raised plant bed they were arranged around, and found a blank page before he risked looking over towards where Severus stood partnered with…

Cyril. Cyril Wilkes.

Rosier must have heard the way his breath caught in his throat, because he nudged Harry, who quickly looked down at his page and scrawled the date, 8 February, at the top. But he wasn’t following what Sprout was saying at all, because—Cyril Wilkes. Harry hadn’t put together until just now, but Cyril… he must be the half-brother of Mael and Emil, the legitimate one. And… When they had been in the house, Voldemort had said something about Cyril being the reliable one… or was it the one with promise? Either way, he was friends with Severus, or at least ran in the same group of Slytherins as him, and that meant…

Did it? Did it really mean that he was the one spying on Harry, reporting information on him back to Voldemort? It seemed unlikely. Wilkes wasn't particularly… he wasn't in NEWT Transfiguration or Defense, and Transfiguration, at least, was a sort of litmus test of the caliber of wizard someone was. It was regarded as the most intensive of the core classes, after all, so anyone who wanted to be
regarded as achieving something with their education took it. As for Defense... Well, Harry remembered what he had said, that day at lunch with the Slytherins. He hadn't thought it worth it to study something that went... against the Dark Arts. So he was clearly a supporter of the Dark, but perhaps his idiocy disqualified him from the sort of intelligence gathering that someone had been doing on Harry...

Harry tapped his quill against the page, leaving a trail of ink. Even if he wasn't the spy, Wilkes was definitely a supporter of the Dark Lord, who had left his younger half-brother to Azkaban. Lord Wilkes is aware. As is Cyril, Voldemort had said. Harry couldn't imagine supporting someone like that...

And yet here he stood, next to Rosier, in Quora's service—reluctantly, indisputably—and having seen the kids in the mansion and followed Voldemort to and from Azkaban. No wonder Sirius had punched him. He’d do so himself, if only it would solve any of his problems.

- 

After a long class spent trying to diagram a plant that changed shape whenever he looked down at his page, Harry was quick to pack his bag. It had been an exhausting day, and all he really wanted to do was go up to the dorm and take a long shower and focus only on getting some reading done. No worrying about Death Eater spies or Sirius Black, just sinking into his research once again.

Of course it wasn't that easy. Nothing could ever be easy, could it? Before he'd even turned to exit the greenhouse he'd had his arm snatched and pulled, and only his magemetry kept him from panicking: it was Severus. Severus, who did not give him time to turn around before pulling him out along the path between the greenhouses, not towards the castle but towards the lawn on the North side of the castle.

"Severus," Harry said as he tried to pull his arm free, not eager to be dragged down the slope, covered in mud and snow. "Severus, stop it."

Severus did not, of course, dragging Harry forward. "What the hell happened to you?" he demanded.

"Nothing that can't be discussed inside," Harry said. "It's cold out here, and—"

"Shut up," said Severus firmly. "Just... Shut up, Harrigan."

Harry frowned, realized he had obeyed, and yanked his arm hard. This time he managed to break Severus's grip, though he nearly toppled himself backwards into the snow in the process. "Look, Severus, I've had a really... bothersome day, to say the least, and I don't have the patience to deal with you right now, I'm sorry."

He turned, determined to head back up past the greenhouses to the castle, but stopped in his tracks at the sight of three more approaching figures. Hector was in the lead, looking furious, with Pandora and, strangely enough, Rosier close behind him.

"Harry," Hector called as he got closer. "What happened? Who—Snape, did you—"

"I was just asking the same thing."

"Asking?" Harry said, backpedaling. He was… grateful for their concern, or wanted to be, really,
but even out here on the lawn he was feeling claustrophobic with all these people asking him questions. "That wasn't asking, that was dragging me off, and—"

"Was it or was it not Sirius Black?" Rosier asked, cutting him off.

"Black?" Severus hissed. Harry looked, and found his face curled into the expected revulsion, and sighed. He shot a glare back to Rosier.

"I told you before, Rosier, it doesn't matter what happened. I dealt with it. I appreciate—"

"Harry, your face looks like you ran straight into a boulder, and the boulder was offended and made sure to let you know," said Hector. "We're—well, I, at least, am not just going to let this slide. If it were resolved, that means you would have landed whoever it was in detention, or gotten them suspended, and since Black was sitting there smirking the whole lesson—"

"I didn't say it was Sirius."

"Whoever it was, if they were appropriately punished, then you wouldn't have a problem telling us, which you aren't."

Harry had to think about that for a moment, but when he figured out Hector's logic he rolled his eyes. "Who says that going to a Professor ever solves anything?" he asked. "Besides, I can—"

"It was Black, then," Snape snarled. Harry could feel his magic beginning to lash around him, the absolute proof of how angry he was, and Harry really did not like that at all...

"What? I didn't—Merlin, would all of you just calm down? You're giving me a headache, and I don't mean my nose." Harry sighed as Severus's eyes narrowed at him; probably mentioning the nose wasn't the wisest move. In any case... "Look, I swear, I have everything under control. I just need to-"

"BLACK!" Severus suddenly bellowed.

Harry was about ready to scream. The four Gryffindor boys were up the slope behind him, and Sirius, apparently, wasn't at all intimidated by Severus's outburst. This time it was up to Harry to grab Snape when he tried to rush by.

"Severus!" he hissed. "Calm down, I really, really don't want to deal with any of this right now!"

Severus glanced his way, but his expression was full of anger. To make things worse, Harry could feel that Sirius had spotted them and started to advance, and--

"Snivellus," he spat back. "What's your problem?"

"You bloody—"

"Sirius," Harry heard another voice say, and when he turned his head to look he identified it as James. He wasn't holding Sirius back, but he was trying to stop him. "Sirius, come on, you've already done enough damage today...."

“Damage? Damage? I’ve barely touch him. If I’d meant to ‘damage’ him, I’d use something more effective than my first… you know what?” Sirius sneered down, and pulled his wand out. Around him, Harry felt the others grab theirs, as well, and he struggled not to let his hand jump to his own pocket. “Sod you and your passive bullshit, James, Harrigan’s a bloody Death Eater and I’m not going to put up with this any more—”
It was hard to tell who threw the first hex, Severus or Sirius. What Harry did know was that the spells collided and ricocheted, and it was up to Pandora once again to grab Harry and pull him out of the way. He let out a low hiss, his head buzzing with the magic—where was the clarity he had felt in his demonstration with Quora? Now, as the pair continued to throw spells, their magic laced with anger, and as Pettigrew rushed forward to join Sirius, and Hector and Rosier came to Severus’s aid, it was all he could do to remember to breath…

He clung to Pandora, trying to focus on her magic. “Stop it,” he cried as Rosier sent a spell that felt twisted and sharp and it broke through Pettigrew’s shield and barely missed him. “Stop…”

“James!” he heard Peter shout. “Come on, help us out—Remus—”

“No, Peter, come back here—” James called in desperation. “Don’t get involved—Sirius, you—”

“Stop it!” Harry tried again.

“They’re not listening, Harry,” said Pandora. “I don’t… we need a Professor. Many Professors, maybe…”

Harry swallowed, and reached out with his sense, trying to push past the fight and find one—but no, there was an easier way— “Hani!”

The elf appeared, and squeaked with fright as a hex went over her head. “Master Harry, what is—”

“Hani, we need a Professor,” he insisted. “Please, just get one, whoever’s—”

She cracked out of sight again, and the burst of magic felt like someone was driving a nail into his skull. “Harry,” said Pandora, squeezing his shoulder. “Harry, come on, I have to—protego!”

A shield appeared in front of her, but quick as she had cast it, it wasn’t enough. Harry could feel that, and so, when the hex broke through, he threw his arm between it and Pandora and gasped with pain as it sent shockwaves up his bone. He could feel it so clearly, the magic, like he had grabbed a live wire and it was running through him—

“Finite!” Pandora cried. “Finite incantatem! Finite—”

When the spell released, Harry sagged in relief, but he forced himself to grab for his wand. Pandora’s shield would not be strong enough, but his… if he could just… but his mind was so thick, with all the magic, and his arm had gone numb after the spell had left and… he just wanted it to stop for a moment, so he could think, and resolve this, and—another spell came zooming towards them, and he grabbed Pandora and rolled them aside, and as the snow-covered grass connected with his head the chill brought him a moment of desperate clarity, and a memory—

“IMMOBULUS!”

Silence. Thank god for a bit of silence.

Like the last time he had chosen that method, however, the amount of magic he had poured into that spell hit him in the gut. If he wasn’t already on the ground, he would have sagged. It wasn’t as bad this time—there weren’t as many people involved—and he quickly rolled off of Pandora and staggered to his feet, offering her a hand up, as he tried to gather his thoughts. It had all happened so fast.

“Harrigan,” someone called—Remus, the only one of the Gryffindors who hadn’t been frozen. He’d been behind even James. “Are you alright? Moone?”
“I’m alright,” Pandora replied when Harry did not. He was too busy staring at the six immobile figures. He could feel them, feel their magic, and… their fear. James’ in particular was lashing around dangerously, even though he hadn’t actually been involved in the fight.

“Harrigan?”

“I’m— I’m fine,” he replied, forcing himself to look away from James’ wide eyes. “I… I shouldn’t have done that…”

“Harry, you did what you needed to,” Pandora said, grabbing his arm. “Are you… last time you did that, you couldn’t even stand. Are you…”

“I’m fine,” he repeated. “I… where are the Professors?”

He looked up towards the castle, feeling for them, but he found a crowd instead, not only the rest of the class which had been in Herbology, but others, too, drawn to the commotion. From it, three figures came hurrying down, slipping a bit in the snow, but they weren’t Professors; it was Floyd and Kirke, and Katie Holmes, who was a Hufflepuff prefect.

“Lupin,” she called, at the front. “What is going on here?”

Floyd and Kirke didn’t stop in front of Remus, but hurried down towards Harry and Pandora. “Are you guys— Harry, you look even worse. Was Black the one that—”

“Guys, please,” said Harry, pressing his palm into his head. His headache was getting worse. There wasn’t overwhelming magic flying around, but something about the frozen faces and the magic struggling again his spell was scaring him. “Can you go find a professor, please, we need to get them—I shouldn’t have…”

“No need, Harry,” said Pandora, pointing up the slope. “Come on…” She pulled him a bit closer to the six frozen figures, and Harry wasn’t in any shape to resist. Coming down towards them was not one, but three professors, Quora, of course, in the lead. Sprout and McGonagall were close behind him. Sprout, who hadn’t seen the scene in the hall, was looking at the frozen students in alarm, but when Quora drew close he simply inspected the closest— Pettigrew.

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“Again, Mr. Harrigan?” Quora chided, gesturing to the students frozen with their arms and wands raised. “You know that spell is not meant for this… Volomotor Facite.”

His incantation made McGonagall gasp softly, and Harry, with his magemetry on high alert, could see why: rather than simply ending Harry’s spell, Quora’s sank into the limbs and compelled them to move. He concentrated it in the wand arms—where their own magic was greatest—and the struggle between the two opposing magics was visible in the way they began to shake. But when the immobulus broke, it was like a sheet of ice cracking under the weight of Quora’s spell, and each victim’s magic raced out to finish the destruction.

One by one they staggered free, Pettigrew even falling to his knees, and all gasping as though they had been running rather than frozen. Sirius’s face was an unnatural shade of green, Rosier had a tear in his robes, and Hector’s hair looked about as unruly as it was when he woke up in the morning, though he didn’t seem particularly worried about that now, looking over towards Harry and Pandora, eyes flicking up and down, taking in the state of their robes. Sirius was the first to recover enough to speak, and speak he did, bursting with accusations—

“Harrigan set Snape on us!” he nearly shouted, jabbing his hand—and so his wand—towards Harry. “He’s mental, I tell you, he attacked—”
“That’s a lie if I ever—” Hector started between breaths, but McGonagall cut them both off, red in the face as she snapped—

“Silence!”

Everyone, of course, obeyed, and McGonagall pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I warned you, Minerva,” said Sprout.

“I know, Pomona. Lower that wand at once, Mr. Black, or so help me I will have it out of your hands for the rest of the year.”

Sirius was turning red with anger, but James reached forward and grabbed his arm, pushing it down. He was pale—being frozen hadn’t agreed with him at all. Harry watched with alarm as Sirius glanced at him and did a double-take, only to turn his glare back on Harry. He lowered his wand, at least.

“I… I’m sorry, Professors,” Harry said slowly, breaking the stretch of silence. “I… I know I should have—after last time, I should have thought about how to… I’m not sure why immobulus is the first thing to come to mind…”

“What on earth happened to your face, Mr. Harrigan?” McGonagall asked, finally turning to look at him.

Merlin, everyone was on about his face… he must not have gotten it as cleaned up as he had thought, if that was what she was commenting about…

“Am I to take it that the wall you ran into on your way to my class was one of these students?” Sprout asked dryly.

Harry flushed, and Pandora spoke in his stead. “That ‘wall’ was actually a ‘someone’, and that someone’s fist, to be specific, I think.” She didn’t name names, but that didn’t stop Sprout from eyeing James and Sirius speculatively. To nearly everyone’s surprise, it was Remus who dropped the pretense.

“It was Sirius, Professors,” the Gryffindor said firmly. “He’s been after Harrigan all year, and he admitted he did it. That’s why Snape went after him, and then Peter got involved, and Rosier and Smithe backed up Snape…”

“Harry sent Hani to get help,” Pandora added. “But things were getting out of hand. If he hadn’t cast the immobulus…”

“And Mr. Potter?” Quora asked.

Harry frowned and glanced at James, still stuck, and then over at Remus, who shrugged. “I don’t think he did anything but get caught in my spell,” Harry said slowly. He watched as James eyes widened ever so slightly—did he really think Harry was going to throw him under the bus for something he hadn’t done? Bloody hell, did all the Gryffindors think he was a Death Eater? Just because he hung out with Snape, and… well… He fought the urge to glare at Quora, knowing it would do him no good. “It was just Black and Pettigrew, and, um.” He gestured at Hector, Rosier, and Severus.

Quora nodded. The other two Professors were exchanged glances, behind him. “Well,” he said after a moment. “I think the first order of business is that all of you—Black, Pettigrew, Snape, Rosier, Smithe—all of you will be coming up to the castle with me. You will be in detention until—yes, all
of you, sitting at your desks in absolute silence, until you have cooled your heads. As for the rest of your discipline…” He turned about, gesturing to McGonagall. “I believe this is one of those matters for Head of Houses to take the reigns?”

“Yes,” said McGonagall. “I will discuss this with Horace—and Filius, yes.”

“If I may, Minerva,” Sprout said. “As it was my class, I believe that I will take one matter into my own hands. Sirius Black!”

Sirius jumped. Her normally gentle demeanor had left Professor Sprout, and though she was not tall for a moment she seemed to loom. “Never in my years has a sixth year student been so thoroughly unrepentant after not one, but multiple acts of violence against another. For attacking a fellow student, you will have detention in the greenhouses from eight am to eight pm this Saturday and Sunday. And on top of that, you should know that if Mr. Harrigan wishes to lodge official complaint against your person, I will support him. If he wants to pursue legal action—you are of age, Mr. Black, and would be tried as an adult. And regardless of the outcome of that, your continued enrollment would lie in the discretion of the school Governors.”

When his thoughts caught up with what she had said, Harry’s breath caught in his throat. That—she was… was she?

“Pomona?” said McGonagall, whose angry flush had faded somewhat. “He—”

“I told you, Minerva,” the Professor said firmly. “Detention is the least we should do.”

Sirius did not seem to have quite understood the gravity of his situation. If Harry wanted, he could go around Dumbledore with what Professor Sprout was doing, and—Harry was not entirely sure who the school Governors were, but he could guess: old money, pureblood, friends of the likes of Walburga Black, who wouldn’t at all mind giving the young… to use the term, bloodtraitor, what was coming to him. No, while James’ eyes were just as wide as McGonagall’s, Sirius still protested:

“But Professor—it’s Hogsmeade—”

“Keep arguing and I’ll have you both in detention every Hogsmeade weekend for the rest of the year, Mr. Black!”

He shrunk back, cowed by Professor Sprout’s temper. The witch stood there, glaring at him for a long moment, but whatever sense Sirius had seemed to have rallied, because he stood quiet.

“If we are finished here,” said Quara, when the silence had stretched to an awkward length, “Then you will follow me, boys. Mr Harrigan—do see Madame Pomfrey about that nose.”

He turned, and began to walk away without comment. It took a moment for the five who were to follow him to begin moving, but Professor McGonagall clicked her tongue impatiently, and herded them after the man.

“Mr. Harrigan,” said Sprout when they had moved out of earshot. “Five points from Ravenclaw for lying.”

There was a beat of silence, and then, surprising him once again, it was the Gryffindors who jumped to his aid. “Professor, you can’t—that’s totally unfair, he just didn’t—”

She gave them a look, and, the temper she had just unleashed on Sirius still fresh in everyone’s mind, that was enough. But when she looked back to Harry her eyes were softer. “If you don’t inform us of these problems early on, we cannot help prevent things like these,” she told him. “Now. For doing
your best to de-escalate a situation, and for a remarkable display of magic—twenty points to
Ravenclaw. But do look into alternatives to the *immobulus*, dear.”

He nodded wordlessly. His head was still ringing from all the magic and—he couldn’t get his heart
to stop pounding, no matter how steady he forced himself to breath. A nod was all he could manage.

Sprout smiled. “That’s enough excitement for one afternoon, I think? I will see you all at dinner.
Thank you for your assistance, all of you left here. Miss Holmes, if you would mind coming with me
for a minute…”

The Head of Hufflepuff and her prefect turned to head towards the greenhouses again, and the group
left behind looked at each other only for a moment before breaking into movement.

“Merlin, Harry,” said Kirke, him and Floyd stepping forward as James and Remus hurried away.
Remus had his hand on James’ shoulder. “You look like shit, but—did you really freeze them with
an *immobulus*? That’s—”

“I didn’t mean to,” Harry groaned, but he was watching the retreated pair. “I just…”

“Did the same thing you did in the hall,” Pandora said lightly. “Demonstrated that you have far more
power behind your spells than anyone expects of a Ravenclaw, and somehow manage to once again
ignore the way magic is *supposed* to work.”

Harry glanced at her. “If you say so,” he said, but then his eyes snapped back towards the
Gryffindors. He hadn’t meant—he needed to. “Look—”

“She’s right,” said Floyd, tilting his head to study Harry. “That was an impressive display. Didn’t
you spend your summer at the—”

Harry cut him off “Look, I—just, I’ve got to…”

He gestured vaguely up the hill, not able to articulate the impulse, and before they could reply he
pushed past the two Hufflepuffs and chased after James and Remus.

“Hey,” Harry called, trying to stop them, as he hurried to catch up. “Hey, Potter, look, I—”

James turned around. He looked like he was resisting grabbing for his wand, and was eyeing Harry,
who held up his hands, half in surrender, half to try and balance himself from the wave of dizziness
rolling over him from running.

“I’m not going to—look, I’m…” He swallowed. “I’m sorry about the—I didn’t mean to get you in
that spell. I just needed them to stop—I didn’t know how to…”

“Slow down, Harrigan,” said James. He glanced around, but the crowd that had gathered during the
fight had dispersed. Scared away by McGonagall, no doubt. He stepped forward. “Anyone could see
you did what needed to be done.”

“Still, I could—that couldn’t have been pleasant, that spell. Or Quora’s.”

James shuddered, and then looked annoyed that he’d had that much of a response and reached up to
push his hair back, turning away. “I can’t imagine it was exactly pleasant being punched in the face,
either.”

“Er,” said Harry. “No, not really.”
“I’m sorry about that. I’ve tried—”

“I know,” said Harry. “I get it. It’s not your fault. He’s—” But he cut off. Sirius was James’ best friend, and even if they agreed he was an idiot, Harry and James had no such connection. Frankly, Harry wasn’t even sure why he was bothering…

“Come on,” said James suddenly. “You should get inside, and to Madame Pomfrey, like Professor Quora said. And into something clean and dry, before you get sick.”

Harry looked down. His robes, once black, were on top of the blood patched with mud, snow, and grass. “Er, yeah. I suppose I should.”

The three of them stood there for a moment longer, fidgeting, before Remus broke the awkward stretch by taking the first step. Harry and James were quick to follow.

“I’m… I should have done more,” James said as they walked. “I didn’t even try to stop him, or Peter, not really. I should have—I could have caught him with petrificus, or something, before—but…”

“You wouldn’t turn your wand on your friends.” Harry shook his head. “Look, I understand. Really. I’d rather not be punched in the face, but you can’t control him.”

James sighed as they finally reached the castle proper. “You’re being awfully decent about this.”

“Um. Sorry?”

“It would be easier if you weren’t. I’ve… I’ve tried to keep an eye on him, but…”

“You can’t keep him out of trouble if he doesn’t care about the consequences,” Harry said. “He doesn’t respect them at all. I’d say you should try to show him, but I’m not sure anything is going to get through…”

Remus came to a halt, and Harry had to jump back to avoid colliding with him. The jerking made him wince—his head really was pounding. He tried to push it away; he’d had worse…

“Are… are you going to do it?” Remus asked. “Submit a complaint?”

“.They all think I should,” said Harry, and he watched as both Gryffindors’ faces fell. “After all he’s done, and what Dumbledore’s let you get away with… He’s never going to realize that what he’s doing is wrong, if no one ever makes it serious. Didn’t you hear him? He was more worried about missing out on Hogsmeade than the threat of being expelled.”

“He’s never had the most… organized priorities,” Remus said quietly. “But…”

“But he’s your friend,” said Harry. He shook his head, and realized that was his answer. “I’m not going to, no, not this time. We… I think he’s a violent idiot, frankly, who hasn’t got an ounce of sense, and I think that if he doesn’t grow up soon he’s going to get someone killed. But…” He hesitated, trying to think of a way to phrase this that wouldn’t be self-incriminating. “I understand, I think, where he’s coming from. He doesn’t like me because—”

“Harry!”

Harry jumped, hand flying to his wand at the the desperation in the call—and he looked up to find Regulus rushing towards them from around the corner. “Because he cares for Regulus, still,” he said quickly and quietly, looking to the pair of Gryffindors.
“Yeah,” said James. “I know.”

“What are you doing, Potter?” Regulus spat as he got closer. Harry could feel the connection between his magic and his wand, eager to throw out some spell.

“Reg,” Harry said, stepping between them. “Hi. We’re just talking. Easy.” He deliberately turned back, meeting James’ eyes with a raised eyebrow. “Anyways, try to talk him, will you?”

“We will,” James promised. “For however much good it will do… we’ll try.”

Regulus by now had come to stand by Harry, and James gave him a brief nod before looking to Remus, jerking his chin, and heading off down the hall.

“I heard—Sirius got into a fight with you,” Regulus said as soon as Harry turned to him. “And—Mordred’s blade, Harry, you should be with Madame Pomfrey. What did he do to—”

“I wasn’t in the fight,” Harry said quickly. “Sirius and I had another run-in this afternoon, and I…well, I wasn’t thinking very clearly, and I provoked him. And some people got offended, and you know how easy it is to goad Sirius…”

Regulus reached out and took Harry’s arm, looking directly into his eyes. “We’ll make him regret it, Harry, I promise. I’ll tell the others to—”

“No, wait, no. Look, Regulus. I know I look a mess, but the situation with Sirius is under control. I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret—”

“Regret!” Regulus exclaimed. “Harry, have you looked at yourself? No one half-decent would let him get away with this!”

“I didn’t say I was letting him get away with it!” Harry snapped. Regulus’s jaw snapped shut, and Harry jumped on what he’d spurt out—it would only be a little lie. “Reg, when I say that I have it under control, you seem to think that I mean I don’t want revenge. But—” He looked around, stalling for time to formulate his words, and stepped a bit closer, dropping his voice. “I know you don’t think much of me, fine. But I can and will deal with Sirius on my own terms. And I’d appreciate it if you did not interfere. I don’t need to have any distractions in this matter, not you, or Rosier, or Severus, or any of your Slytherin friends. You hear me?”

Regulus stared at him for a moment, then nodded slowly. “At least let me take you to the Infirmary,” he insisted. “Because—honestly, Harry, are you certain you weren’t hit with anything? You look like—”

“One stinging hex to the arm,” Harry replied. “That’s it, and it wasn’t even aimed for me. I’m fine.”

“No you’re not,” said Regulus, and he shoved his wand back in his pocket—a momentary victory, as he used the freed hand to grab Harry. If it weren’t for the way the hallway was swimming, “You’re barely on your feet, look at you. Come on.”

He pulled Harry off down the hall. What was it with Slytherins and dragging him places? Or maybe it was only Severus and Regulus…

“Did he at least get an official punishment?”

“What?”

“Sirius? Did he—tell me the professors caught him in action.”
“Well, sort of…” Harry winced as they came to the stairs leading up to the first floor, but Regulus steadied him. “I, um, froze everyone involved in the fight, so when they showed up, it was pretty clear they were in the middle of throwing spells.”

“Froze everyone?”

“Immobulus.”

They paused at the top of the stairs, waiting for a group of Hufflepuffs to go by. They made no effort in their gaping at Harry as they went past. “That—I’d heard that someone had used immobulus on a whole hallway, a while back, but I thought… Was that you, too?”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed, rubbing his forehead, which Regulus seemed to take as a cue to start moving again. “I don’t recommend trying it.”

“I wouldn’t. If I tried something like that… that spell isn’t meant for living creatures, Harry. It shouldn’t even… that’s not how that spell works.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s the first one that came to mind, and it did the trick.”

“So? Did Sirius get detention, at least?”

“Yeah. Well, all of them—er, that’s Sirius, Pettigrew, Hector, Severus, Rosier—”

“Rosier? Evan Rosier?”

“Severus was first in the fight, he backed him up. Is that weird?”

“Well, he… Mulciber calls him ‘Prince Rosy’, because he never does anything himself. He must like you, or…”

Or want something from you, he didn’t say, though the thought gave him a chill. Maybe it was Rosier, not Wilkes… Harry pushed that aside, too. “Or maybe he likes Severus, since it was him he was helping. Either way, Quora put them all in detention until dinner, and Sirius has detention with Sprout for the whole weekend.”

Harry decided not to mention Sprout’s recommendation that he take a complaint to the Board of Governors. Regulus would probably pounce on that.

“That’s it?”

“McGonagall and Slughorn and Flitwick are going to discuss if they want to add on anything else.”

“So that’s it. McGonagall never really punishes her favorite Gryffindors.”

Harry didn’t have anything to say to that, and Regulus was distracted a moment later by taking points from some second years giggling at—at Harry’s face, most likely. But when they reached the end of the hall, Regulus paused.

“I do think highly of you, you know,” he said after a moment.

“I—what?”

“You said, ‘I know you don’t think much of me.’ But I do. You’re brilliant and powerful and kind and—I don’t want you to think I don’t know that, Harry.”
It took several seconds for Harry to realize what Regulus was saying, but when he did he flushed to the ears. “I—er—I’m not—” he stammered, paused, and managed, “Thanks?”

Regulus was frowning as he opened the door to the Hospital Wing, which was perhaps why when Madame Pomfrey came hurrying out of her office and waved him to sit at the end of a bed she was rather brusk. “A fight, Mr. Harrigan?” she asked as she examined his by now thoroughly swollen nose.

“Breaking up one, ma’am,” he replied warily. “But I got punched in the nose earlier.”

“Oh?” She raised an eyebrow. “And you, Mr. Black?”

“It was Sirius No-name who threw that punch,” Regulus said coldly. “And he—”

Harry cut him off with a yelp as she prodded his nose. “Just bruised,” she announced. “I’ll give you some salve for it, but it will be tender for a few days. But you’ve definitely gone through more than just a punch, Mr. Harrigan. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”

“Magical exhaustion,” Harry said. “Or, partially, from stopping the fight. I… Professor Quora gave me a potion, last time this happened… it was blue?”

She frowned, and waved her wand in a swirling pattern he was having trouble tracking, and a cloud of magic settled over Harry. He closed his eyes to the flare of blue light. “And a headache,” he added. “A bad headache.”

“Goodness, Mr. Harrigan,” she said, though she did lower her voice as she went over to one of her potions cupboards. “That kind of depletion—how exactly did you stop the fight? Stopping time?”

“You’re not far from it, ma’am,” said Regulus. “He used immobulus.”

“Immobulus! On a human being? That could do serious damage, Mr. Harrigan—”

“I know,” he said. “I really do. I’ve been lectured on it, and I really don’t want to try it again.”

She sighed, and uncorked one of the bottles as she came back to him. Harry caught a whiff of the familiar scent of the potion she gave him for headaches and opened his eyes just long enough to grab it and down it. Thank Merlin.

“This level of magical exhaustion shouldn’t have happened from just one spell,” the Matron said after a minute. “Impressive though it may be to stop someone with a spell like immobulus…”

Now that his head was beginning to clear, Harry could think again. “Oh, I had a demonstration duel with Professor Quora today,” he said. “For the second years. So I guess I was already a bit worn out…”

“It wasn’t one person he stopped, either,” said Regulus. “It was the whole lot of them.”

“It was only six,” Harry corrected.

“Six?” Madame Pomfrey’s hand jumped to his forehead. “How on earth are you still upright, Mr. Harrigan?”

“No clue, ma’am,” said Harry, trying not to squirm from her touch. She was just checking his temperature, no need to fuss. “But I would really like to take that potion now, if you don’t mind.”

“Well, I’m afraid I’ll need you to stay in for a few hours to sleep it off,” she said. “And I’m not sure I
wasn’t you out of my sight until I’m certain you’re not going to be hit with it later. I’ll send a house elf to get you some fresh clothing to change into… And you?” she asked, turning to Regulus. “Any stray hexes go your way?”

“I’m just here for Harry.”

Madame Pomfrey looked skeptical.

“He wasn’t there,” Harry confirmed. “Professor Quora took everyone who was fighting for detention right away. He just came because he heard his brother was attacking me.”

“He’s not my brother!”

“Don’t say that,” Pomfrey said. Her voice was suddenly sharp. “And don’t start on that ‘Sirius No-Name’ nonsense, either. Even I know he hasn’t been officially disowned.”

That was apparently not the right thing to say, because Regulus bristled. “You know nothing about this. He is no Black—”

“He is still your brother, child,” the Matron said firmly. “You are young yet, perhaps too young to understand. But when you are an adult, you will understand, so don’t go ruining it for yourself now.”

Regulus opened his mouth again to snap back, but just as quickly shut it with a snap. He closed his eyes for a moment, long enough to school his expression back into something more manageable, and when he opened them again he turned to Harry. “I’m sorry for the trouble, and wish you a speedy recovery.”

“Er… thanks?”

Regulus nodded once, and spun on heel to storm out of the wing. Madame Pomfrey sighed.

“Those boys… always so sure of themselves, never thinking through what they are getting into…”

“It runs in the family,” Harry said. Madame Pomfrey jumped a little bit, and looked embarrassed.

“Yes, well,” she said, and waved an arm towards the washroom at the far end of the infirmary, next to her office. “Go and get yourself cleaned up, Mr. Harrigan. I’ll call an elf for your things.”

Harry might have fought back against this order, but he still felt like he was pushing through a thick sludge to move. The sooner he recovered from this, the better—he had things to do.

He needed to finish his new null ward. The carvings were nearly done, so it was just a matter of activating it, and he couldn’t do that until he was recovered. He couldn’t let this weakness drag him down any longer. And after that…

He knew what he needed to do.

It wasn’t a decision he wanted to make, but it was the only way he could be certain. Sirius wasn’t the only one terrified by thought of Regulus swearing his life to the Death Eaters, and not only that—there were other names on the list he’d left himself, like Rosier and Severus and Barty Crouch Jr. He didn’t think any of them had officially joined yet, but Severus, at least, was eager to do so as soon as he could, and…

The meeting was on Saturday. Harry needed to be certain before then that he wasn’t letting anyone else walk into the worst mistake of their lives. He needed for it not even to be an option—and for
that, he needed to make a deal with the devil. And if the devil accepted…

After that, he could worry about figuring out who the spy for the Death Eaters was, and how he was going to get Sirius off his back, and what he was going to do to ease the tensions between the Black brothers—and how he was going to get home, someday.

But for now, he pulled his sodden robe off over his head, and filled the sink basin with water to wash clean with. One step at a time.
Chapter Twenty Eight

There was one thing he needed to know, before.

And so he sought out Severus at lunch, pulling him into the abandoned classroom they’d used before.

Severus looked at him like he was insane.

“You… want me to break into your mind.”

“Yes.”

“You. You want me—“

“Will you do it or not?”

Severus crossed his arms over his chest, not breaking the gaze. It was a strange feeling for Harry to look him in the eye like this. He hadn’t realized how natural it had become to avoid eye contact, since Quora had shown up.

“And when I do, are you going to obliviate me of whatever I see?” Severus asked. “Because that seems likely, from where I’m standing. Last time I got through, you erased both of our memories, so forgive me if I’m a little skeptical.”

“Nothing for you to get to, anymore,” Harry said. “Frankly, I don’t know what it will be like for you inside my head, with all the things you won’t be able to see, but…”

“And what am I supposed to be looking for?”

“You’ll do it, then?”

“Perhaps.” Severus’s eyes narrowed. “But it depends on what the answer to that question is, and more now that you’ve tried to dodge it.”

“I’m not trying to dodge it.”

“Then tell me.”

“Fine,” Harry said, but that was easier than actually doing it. He hated that he even had to ask this, and the leverage it gave Severus over him… but he trusted Severus, to some extent. More than anyone else he could ask, and he needed to know. “I have something that I am going to do, which I believe to be an optimal decision, but I need to be certain that there isn’t anything affecting my
reasoning.”

Severus opened and closed his mouth several times. Then he ground his teeth, and seemed to debate for a moment before—“Something?”

“I am quite literally incapable of telling you,” Harry said, then paused. “And saying that is more than I knew I would be able to.”

“…a curse?”

Harry opened his mouth, but the words that came out were not his own, and he felt magic twisting at his throat. He wouldn’t look like it—no, he could feel his mouth peeling back into a smile—but it felt like he was suffocated. Choking on his attempts to say things he couldn’t. The words he said, however, were these. “Of course not; don’t be ridiculous. If I were under a curse, I would be asking you to break it, wouldn’t I?”

Severus’s eyes widened, and the magic grew even tighter. It isn’t my fault that Severus is perceptive, he thought bitterly, for all the good that it could do him to try and communicate with magic. And if it makes me act out of character, it’s only going to get worse.

If his thoughts had any impact, Harry could not tell. If the pain he was feeling had been rooted in any actual physical affliction, he would have passed out from oxygen deprivation by the time Severus nodded. It was just an illusion, an illusion somewhat diminished by the fact that he could still very clearly feel his real body functioning fully and the magic twisting in him, less persuasive than the work Quora had done personally but terrifying on different grounds. As the spell seemed to accept Severus’s reaction and receded into near nothingness, hidden, Harry imagined, in his own magic, waiting to turn on him again, and the pain faded away, it left more space in his thoughts for his fear to calcify. Who was to say that Quora hadn’t put something else into the gaes? That there hadn’t been something else hidden in the contract that Harry hadn’t noticed? Something that was nudging him towards—

He pushed that thought back into the recesses of his mind. He had to hope that if there were something, Severus would be able to spot it. He couldn’t live life worrying about it, or he’d be right back where he was being too afraid that this would change the future, too. He’d decided to do something, and he wasn’t going to let a possibility paralyze him.

“So you’ll do it?”

“I don’t know how I would know if I found what you expect me to find.”

“Just tell me if there’s anything… external,” Harry said. “Of course there will be the obfuscus making things strange, and some other things, but…I’m going to try and think about the decision, and just—just tell me if there’s anything noticeably, um, odd.”

Was he overconfident in his ability to occlude what he needed to? Perhaps. He knew he could throw off the spell if Severus got too close, and claim that he’d just panicked. He really did want to know, though, or he wouldn’t have suggested this in the first place.

“Odd. Right,” said Severus. “I—are you sure?”

“Why don’t you see for yourself?” Harry invited, pushing past his misgivings and resisting the urge to grind his teeth.

Severus raised his wand. He held in in front of him for a moment, and Harry watched his face shift. And then his grip tightened on his wand, and his magic began to shift, and—“Legillimens!”
A bizarre feeling, to invite someone in willingly, with only the barest of defenses in place. Harry closed his eyes as he felt Severus’s presence, like a thought from so far off the pitch it didn’t even—

Severus was gone almost as quickly as he’d come, leaving Harry blinking at him. His eyes fixed on Severus, who had let his wand drop somewhat, and was frowning down at it. Did he look pale, or was the pallor of Severus’s the same as ever?

“Are you alright?” Harry asked. There was so much that could go wrong—he hadn’t felt the gaes activate, but if it lashed out at Severus like it did him—if the pain was all in his head, and Severus was in his head, too...

“Yes,” said Severus firmly. “It’s just… been a while, is all.” He shook his head, looking up. “It’s the— the magic. I’m trying not to let myself think about it, but…”

“Oh,” said Harry, relieved. That hadn’t even crossed his mind. “Yes, well, I’ve shown you how magemetry can screw me over.”

“Magemetry?” Severus echoed. “There’s… a name for it? You’ve never said that before!”

“It’s not exactly a common thing,” Harry said. “Dunno what good knowing the name does you.”

In truth, he’d only started to use the word after Quora did. He’d read it, back at the OMRL, but knowing that a word existed and actually making use of it were two different things.

“Why haven’t you ever told me?”

“I just did,” Harry said mildly. “And you didn’t want any of my answers, you wanted to find out about it for yourself. Can we please get back to this? Is the magic going to be too much?”

Severus scowled, but he lifted his wand. “No,” he snapped. “Legimins!”

This time he was much more obvious in Harry’s head. Probably because Harry had made him angry—that was interesting. For someone like Quora, whose presence was much subtler, at least from—

Woah.

The instant Harry had started to think about Quora, the gaes had shifted into place, rippling his mind like some sort of factory line assembling bricks into a wall, cordonning Severus off. And thinking about the gaes—okay, get back on track. Occlumency. He searched back for a memory he could focus on, to make sure it didn’t push Severus out entirely… the fight. He brought it to the front of his mind, focusing on remembering it in as clear detail as he could, the mix of snow and mud as he and Pandora crashed to the ground, the still after he’d cast the *immobulus*…

In the long pause that had followed everyone being frozen in place, Harry willed the memory to stay there. Severus was seeing what he was remembering, so if he just stayed in that space… Severus had been frozen at the time—and this was *his* mind. He willed Severus to be stuck, just another *immobulus*…

He left the memory there, and imagined himself stepping back, like the memory was the screen at a movie theater and he was moving up into the seats. Severus was still in the memory, but Harry knew his retreat had been noticed. He’d have to occlude somewhat, or it would be out of his control. After a moment he landed on the idea of dropping the curtain in front of the screen, only the curtains would be made of gauze. Obscuring, but not keeping Severus out entirely. Once that was in place, he took a deep breath, and thought, *I’m going to tell Quora I’ll agree to be a Death Eater, if I can bargain to keep you and Regulus and everyone else safe a bit longer.*
For a moment, Harry thought it had worked.

Then the theater he’d tried to imagine began to shatter, the magic of the gaes crashing through Harry’s mind, and God—how did he describe magic like that? Like tendrils of inky darkness, breaking through to cover up everything—only, the surge of magic made it impossible for Harry to focus, and his careful control split. The memory of the fight shattered and collided with a hundred others, and Severus was thrown from the memory and sent spinning away into other memories, out of sight, but Harry didn’t have time to worry because Sirius was punching him—James trying to hold Sirius back months earlier—showing up at the revision group’s table in the Three Broomsticks—discussing why he was going to the meeting with Hector—the night he’d learned about Raj—the morning the Monday after Quora’s questions—

He was finally shocked back into himself as he stumbled backwards, twisting just in time to catch himself from falling over a desk. He blinked several times, staring at his hands grabbing at the desk. There were only supposed to be two of those, and they were supposed to be still, not floating like ghost through the walls of his vision—

“What the hell?” he heard Severus say, behind him. “Did you—that was not intentional, was it?”

“No,” said Harry, trying to straighten up and—okay, not yet, he needed his grip on the desk or he was going to topple over. “No, I… I told you I’m incapable of telling you, and—for Merlin’s sake!” Grabbing the edges of the desk even tighter, he squeezed his eyes shut and carefully lowered himself to the floor, the vertigo too much to handle. The bloody gaes—

“What are you alright?”

“Dizzy,” Harry grunted. “Sorry. What was I… oh, did you notice anything?”

It was quiet for a moment.

“I’m not sure any of what just happened would qualify as not being odd, Harry.”

“Right,” he said. “Um… can you just… describe to me what exactly you saw?”

“I can try,” said Severus, and he paused again. “It started out… basically as normal as I’ve ever noticed it being, doing that to you. Except you started… a train of thought, I suppose, I think it was about my being there—but then—I’d say you occluded extremely quickly, but it didn’t seem like it was… Well, I mean, of course it was you, but… There aren’t words for this!”

Harry opened his eyes again, glancing over to where an alarming number of Severus’s hands were waving in the air to punctuate his frustration. “You’re doing fine,” he said.

“And then you dug up that time Black—and somehow you stuck me back in me, if that—you did do that, right?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“And then you… somehow… left me there. And started to occlude something else, and that was you, again, and then suddenly everything fell apart and I got the ‘life flashing before your eyes’ reel. Only you’re not dead.”

No answer, then, Harry thought in frustration. The gaes was too much a part of him, and it wasn’t as though Severus was a professional. Quora, on the other hand, was.

“Life flashing before your eyes?” he echoed. “What thrilling memories did that treat you to?”
"Mostly a lot of nothing. From the obfuscus, I think, more than whatever that was—there was a lot of blurry scenes and muted voices, and that sort of thing."

"Oh," said Harry. He didn’t think any of the things he’d seen had been like that, but it had felt like Severus had been separated from him. Maybe he’d been thrown into the ‘part’ of Harry’s mind where the memories were from further back.

"I did see something," Severus said after a moment. “A… man. His face was gone, but he… was big, and fat, and shoving you through a door. Only, on the other side of the door was… more of the obfuscus. Grey."

Harry closed his eyes, and sighed. Yes, that was certainly further back. “...My uncle, I expect.”

“A muggle?”

He jerked his head in assent.

“Disgusting,” Severus said. “They’re so… violent.”

“Not all—my uncle wasn’t exactly…” Harry struggled for words. “They didn’t like magic. It scared them. But I’m sure that not all muggles are…”

“You’re an optimist,” Severus said, and it was in the same vein as when Regulus had called him ‘kind’. “And too soft on them. You’ve told me enough about them before to know they’re the worst sort. And regardless of whether some muggles have a decent bone—and I’ve been around enough to doubt that—the ones that are violent against magic are the enemies of all our people. Could you imagine if the Statute of Secrecy fell? How long do you think it would be before they turned their missiles on us?”

Harry shrugged, feeling dull. The bombs the muggles had at their disposal were terrifying, yes, but wizards communities were so blended in with the rest of the world… well, they couldn’t drop a bomb on Diagon Alley without hitting the rest of London. And even if the Statute fell, there were protections in place. Notice-me-nots. Muggle repelling wards. Those wouldn’t go away just because people knew about them.

And besides, there was a certain faction of wizards a very real and present danger to the muggles, and—

“Harry,” said Severus, and his voice was softer. “He wasn’t just putting you through some door. It was terrifying, for some reason, I could feel it. You were screaming bloody murder—”

“I know, Severus. I was there,” Harry pointed out.

“He was—you were injured. He hit you—”

“I know, ” Harry said, and only after realized how loud he’d gotten. He took a deep breath, steadying himself, and opened his eyes. At least the world wasn’t swimming anymore, but he was beginning to develop a nasty headache. “I haven’t talked to you about your dad, have I?”

“That’s not the same,” said Severus.

“Then it’s not worth talking about,” said Harry.

“It’s not the same, because I at least recognize what my father is is an absolute fuckwit. That he’s a violent bastard who will never understand magic, and will always lash out against it. Like your
“uncle, I’m guessing, only you’re trying to pretend it won’t play out the same way every time—”

“It doesn’t,” Harry said flatly. “How about Lily’s parents, hm? Are they so despicable?”

A recoil—more importantly, a break in the line of conversation. “What do you know?” Severus sneered. “You’ve never met them.”

“And yet her dad was happy to loan me, some kid he’d never met and who isn’t even particularly close to his daughter, one of his books.” Harry shook his head. “You can’t generalize a whole people just by the actions of a few, Severus. I’ve been treated worse by wizards than my Uncle could ever dream of managing, and you don’t see me saying that magic is the enemy.”

One wizard in particular. Maybe his memories of the past were few and far between, but he couldn’t think of a single thing his uncle could have done that stood up to what Quora had managed in a single week.

“There will always be—it’s not about whether there’s something wrong with a group of people,” Severus insisted. “It’s about what happens when those groups collide. It’s about the people who get stuck with people from the wrong side. Like you. Like me.”

“People with broader perspectives on the world? Half-bloods who see the strengths and weaknesses of both sides, and get to choose what parts to make use of? How many times a week does Mulciber let you know that you’re less than him, because of your blood? If a man came after him with a gun, would he even know he was being attacked?”

“So you’d rather magical kids get stuck with muggles who think it’s fine to beat them to a pulp rather than encouraging magicals to stay with magicals and their kids never have to face that.”

“I didn’t say that,” Harry snapped. “And you’re acting like it’s one or the other. Like these are clear facts that are going to end things—if your mother had stayed with a magical, then you’d never have been born, Severus. And my—dad, he was a muggleborn, what about him, hm?”

“There’s ways to overcome these things,” Severus said. “If you listened at the meetings, you would know—muggleborns, you think it’s easy for them, being asked to join an entirely new world at eleven?”

“I did it,” Harry said. “I didn’t know what magic was until I was eleven.”

“And if your mother hadn’t gotten killed in a car crash you wouldn’t have had to face that! And if you had been sent to live with her family instead of your fathers, you’d have known who you were!”

“And I’d bet that if her family were purebloods, they wouldn’t have had me, being a half-blood,” Harry snapped back. “Not that it matters. Why haven’t you gone back to your mother’s family, hm? Begged them to take you in, been raised properly, away from your father?”

For a moment Severus looked like he was going to shout at Harry, but then he sighed, running a hand through his hair. “There is only one person left in the Prince family, and she is, for all intents and purposes, Potter’s aunt.”

News to Harry. “For all intents and purposes?”

“The Ministry does not recognize marriage between two witches. Regardless, I would not go to her for anything, knowing she’s as much a bitch to my mother as the rest of them did.” He paused again. “It’s irrelevant. Look, I just—why did you leave that in? Everything you took out, you had a chance to forget that part of your life,” Severus pressed. “Why didn’t you take that out?”
Why didn’t Harry take out more of his memories? Like his mind didn’t already look like moldy swiss cheese… He shook his head, trying to focus on the question, trying to figure out what Severus meant by it. Would he have taken out the memories of his dad? Thinking about it like that...

“If I took out everything that made me, I wouldn’t be me anymore, would I,” Harry said quietly. “You—you could see how much of me is already gone. I’m already only a small piece of what I was before, aren’t I? Who knows how much I’ve changed…”

“You seem pretty much the same to me,” Severus said—and, oh, that was the closest thing to an answer to his original question as Harry is likely to get, wasn’t it. “I think you kept it because you wanted to remember, and the only reason to remember something like that is to get revenge.”

“My relatives don’t even know I exist,” Harry said. “There’s no revenge to be had.”

“I don’t mean just against your uncle,” Severus said.

“Doesn’t really matter what you mean,” said Harry. “When you’re wrong.”

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Harry woke up with a start, the sounds of the bell tolling breaking through the dream that was already slipping away, his hand wrapped tight around his wand pointing into empty space, heart pounding. It took him a minute to realize where he was—the library—but he couldn’t place much beyond that. It was his usual table, Severus nowhere in sight, of course, because despite their meeting, or perhaps because of it, they were both far too stubborn to—

Their meeting. Then—and now—

Quora—shit. How many times did the bell toll?

He jumped to his feet, shoving the book he’d fallen asleep on into his bag and rushing forward until the clock was in view—*shit*—and then slipped through the door as quickly as he could before taking off at a run. He was late, and Quora was the last person Harry wanted to be late to meeting—especially when so much was riding on that day—

But when he rushed to the top of the stairs to Quora’s office, there was a student already seated at the man’s desk, Quora looking over a piece of parchment she’d handed over, and neither of them so much as glanced at Harry as he shuffled over to the chair between the bookshelves. It must have been a seventh-year, since he was about eighty percent certain it wasn’t one of his year, and that meant there was no part Harry was supposed to play in their discussion except to stay out of the way and manage anyone else who came to the office hours. There weren’t any quizzes scheduled for the rest of the week, so it wouldn’t be busy. Harry took out his defense textbook and the notebook he used for class and tried to read.

It was difficult, at first, heart pounding from the run and the feeling of unease lingered from his forgotten dream, but by the time the seventh year left the office he was fully absorbed in the work. Quora turned to his own stack of papers without greeting him, and when Harry did glance up and realize the girl was gone, he did not think it would be wise to interrupt the Professor for anything. If he wanted an apology, he would extract it, otherwise… Otherwise Harry would wait until the opportune moment, or perhaps the end of the hour, to play out his plan.
It wasn’t that he was nervous, it was just… practical. At least, that was what he told himself as he got lost in a description of a new class of counter-curses.

He was absorbed again in minutes, and it was several pages of reading before that focus was at all disturbed.

“Did you run into more trouble yesterday evening?”

“What? Oh—er, no,” Harry said, looking up from his book. “Pomfrey gave me the same potion you did—I was out all evening.”

“Then why, exactly, did I see you falling asleep in my class this morning?”

“Oh, I…” He hesitated, caught himself licking his lips—where had he picked up that habit? “The potion wore off around three AM, and then I had homework to get done, and…”

“Ah,” said Quora. Harry wondered for a moment if he was going to follow that up, to give some hint as to what had prompted the question, but he just kept writing. Harry cursed his own hesitance—that had been his chance, and he had missed it, and—no, he would just have to take initiative on his own.

“Actually, sir,” he said slowly, before he could think better of it. “I was wondering if I might—I need a favor.”

Quora’s quill stopped, and he actually took the time to turn his head up to look at Harry, an eyebrow sharply raised. Harry swallowed.

“It’s the—I’ve finished my replacement for the null ward. I just need to activate it, but—I need someone to be able to pull me out of it, if I made a mistake or if it is… too much.”

Another bit of security. Even if things went poorly, after, better to start with the null ward, to provide some scant defense.

“I assume you have it here?”

Harry nodded, gesturing to his bag. Quora looked back down at his page, finished his sentence, and stood up. A wave of his wand and the papers had reduced themselves into one neat stack, which fell into place in a folio and slotted into the bookshelf. “Bring it here, then.”

Harry set his book on the table, though he glanced toward the open door. Quora’s wards were thick enough that it was difficult to tell if there was anyone on the other side. He didn’t want anyone else to see, to be curious and maybe mention it to Professor Notaro, who would want to see… who would be able to figure out exactly what sort of ward it was, and wonder why Harry would want something like that…

But he didn’t dare show his hesitation, after having asked for Quora’s help and apparently being granted it. He pulled out the beads, eyes scanning them to be sure none of the beads had been undone, and brought them forward, setting them on the desk. As soon as he set them down, Quora levitated them up, eyeing the beads speculatively.

“What are these made from?” he asked after a moment.

“It’s crushed micah,” Harry said. The powder was suspended in the shapes of runes within the glass beads, held in place by a series of wire cages, such that there was no string passing through to get in the way of the runes. “Activating the circle should put enough magic in the loop to hold the runes together without maintaining the sticking charm. I think.”
“As long as it holds through the casting, yes,” Quora agreed. He was turning the beads slowly about, eyeing them one at a time, though some of the runes were so small Harry wasn’t sure if he could read them at all. He’d had to enlarge both the beads and the powder in order to create them accurately; it was difficult enough to arrange the powder into accurately shaped runes with the spells that he hadn’t even attempted to do it without enlarging them first. But Quora pointed to one, which had a full loop of several runes in it; an extra clause to the spell. “What is this supposed to achieve?”

Harry had to lean in to determine which one he was pointing to. “Oh, it’s to stop the beads from getting cold.”

“Cold?”

“Er. The last set, when the ward was strained, the up in the flow of magic made it cold. When you… when it broke, it froze the skin on my arm.” He paused, but—better to go all in. “There’s another that I’m hoping will make the glass break evenly in two rather than shatter if it does break, opposite to that in the circle.”

Quora considered his answer, then resumed turning the beads about. He seemed to be intent on actually be reading the whole thing, despite the complexity. In retrospect, however, he supposed it was silly to think that any ward a sixth year who’d only studied for a year and a half could create would be too complex for him to follow. He didn’t doubt the man had training in runic magic beyond Harry’s comprehension—or if not training, had studied on his own.

“You’ve increased the rate of magic allowed through,” the Professor said when he reached the end of the line, letting the beads settle on the desk again. “Are you intending to still get the benefits of your magemetry? It would be more practical to simply take the beads off when you enter a situation where you may need it.”

“No, er—I’m hoping that it will make it withstand larger burst of magic,” Harry said. “If it breaks in the situation where I need it most, it’s kind of worthless, isn’t it?”

Quora made a humming sound, then gave Harry a sharp nod. “Very well. If you wish to attempt it, go ahead. I shall ensure you do not render yourself useless to me.”

That phrasing inspired no confidence. At least, Harry supposed, he had to be alive to be useful. Theoretically. Actually, he wouldn’t be surprised if there wasn’t some use Quora could make of his dead body—some Dark Arts spell, or something…

Better not think too hard on that. He pulled out his wand, took a deep breath, cleared his mind, and cast the spell.

This time, he could feel it, and it was different, the way his magic flowed with him—not like a turbulent river, no, more like an aqueduct, flowing easily along the smoothest course, contained and channelled and doing no more than was necessary. He could feel his heart beating strong and steady in his chest, and the air circulating in his chest, and an exhilaration like he was flying—

And then it was done. It cut off so abruptly that Harry thought perhaps something had gone wrong, or that Quora had interfered, but he could feel the ward, and when he looked down the beads were whole and the mica-dust runes bound all the more firmly by the current running through them in endless loops.

Harry jumped when he heard the chair roll back as Quora returned to his seat. “Very good, Mr. Harrigan,” he said idly. “You appear not to have killed yourself.”
Harry avoided rolling his eyes by putting his wand away and picking up the beads. They felt cool in his hand—not unpleasantly, like the old set had when it had been overtaxed, but like that was the temperature they were always going to be, like it was right for them to be cool. And when he slowly slid his hand through the opening, as the ward slipped over him it was like a breeze blowing over him on a hot day. Not uncomfortable, no, but—powerful, in an understated way. And—

Like he’s been living with a ten-pound weight pressing down on his chest, and only now can he actually breath.

“You look surprised.”

Harry finally looked up from the ward, finding Quora watching him. “I—it was easier, this time,” he said. “Significantly.”

“Of course. There is a difference in working with something agreeable. Earth was not your element, so that you were able to activate something this complex with it is… surprising, to say the least. Impressive, you might say, if it were not such a foolish thing to do.”

That translated to high praise, coming from him. Which was good, considering the circumstances, but… Harry looked back down at the string of beads dangling from his wrist, still unsure what to think. It almost felt like cheating, for it to have been this… He couldn’t say ‘easy’, really, because even if it had been easier if he hadn’t had Madam Pomfrey’s potion the night before he wouldn’t have survived it. And if another fight broke out… well, with this new protection, with any luck he wouldn’t be so desperate as to depend on immobulus again, anyways.

He had just looped it the final time, and was satisfied that it wasn’t going to slip off his wrist, when Quora stood up and came around the desk. “May I?” he asked, though why he bothered—he was already pulling out his wand. Mindful of what he intended, Harry made himself nod and stand still as Quora waved his wand in a complex pattern. Around him, the ward shimmered as Quora’s magic came into contact with it, and lit up in a web-like pattern over his skin. Harry glanced down at his hand, seeing the magic criss-crossing over it, and frowned: visualizing magic was as bizarre to him as it had been the first time he and Severus attempted the spell.

Eventually, Quora moved his hand in a sharp slicing movement, cancelling his spell, and the glow receded. “You did not feel that?”

“Feel it, yes, but… like being poked versus being stabbed,” Harry said. Or being tickled, more accurately.

“Ah,” said Quora. “Then perhaps we should put it to the real test?”

Real test? Did he mean—

Yes, yes he did. He released his magic. Harry winced, feeling the magic coursing through the beads and around his body, but it did not shatter, nor did the beads grow cooler than comfortable, nor did an overwhelming amount of Quora’s magic come through. There was some, of course, and really any amount of Quora’s magic was too much, because it was… different from anyone else’s magic that Harry had encountered. Maybe it was a case of it being so thoroughly twisted by his use of the Dark Arts; he was a Dark Lord, after all. Harry hoped not, because—well, it was…

Enticing. Yes, that was the best word for it. Harry’s magic was drawn to it, as much as Voldemort had seemed drawn to the curse scar on his head the first time they had met. Even now, as Quora stood there watching him, head tilted in something like curiosity, Harry could feel the reaches of his magic that came through moving up towards his head. Some flickered around his hand, as well, and
the scar that ran up his forearm, but that was negligible compared to the amount that centered around his forehead. Harry grit his teeth, trying to hold himself still.

“Curious, isn’t it?” Quora said softly when at last he began to pull that back in as well. “Some wizards train for years and are barely able to sense the presence of another person, let alone a spell, and yet here you are…”

Harry blinked, trying to clear his head. He hadn’t realized how much it still affected him, not until it was gone and he could think clearly again. Well, semi-clearly; it felt like someone had shoved a wad of cotton in his mouth, which was, if nothing else, very distracting. “I’ve never read anything about that.”

“Read? Oh, no; the art isn’t something anyone would have written down. It is… something realized, in time, by a select few with full mastery over themselves. None who would write it down. Like most advanced techniques of magic, it is better that way. Outlining something of such complexity that it is impossible for the average to achieve in any number of lifetimes, or even begin to understand… it is a quick way to get something labeled as a Dark Art, regardless of the true nature of it, for the sake of restraining those powerful enough to wield it.” He returned to his seat, then, leaving Harry standing before the desk, and folded his hands in his lap as he continued to speak. “Those who are weak fear the powerful, knowing full well that those with power can control them. Those who are powerful fear others power, lest their position at the top be challenged. Dumbledore may scold those who dabble in the Dark Arts, but never think for a moment he doesn’t have a good deal of experience in using them himself.”

“Not as much as you.”

Quora actually laughed at that. “Perhaps. Perhaps not—he was already old when I was a boy. Old, and powerful enough to defeat Grindelwald in a duel that is recorded more as myth than fact.”

“...you think **Dumbledore** is better at the Dark Arts than you?”

“Better? No. No, not at all. Experience is one thing, but in the matter of the Dark—you have to want it, Mr. Harrigan, I’ve told you before. Dumbledore thinks himself too **good** to be a Dark Wizard, and so he is not.”

“That simply.”

Quora’s smile was cool. There was little to be gained from trying to read the man’s expressions, in any case; no doubt he could don them as easily as a robe. What truth there was to the man was buried under layers of masks and control.

“That was not all you wished to ask of me, I think,” the man said after a moment. “Have I proven well enough that I have no intent to let you die, or will you need to dream up some other demonstration?”

Harry opened his mouth, caught off guard, unsure of what to say to that. Was that—how had Quora come to that conclusion? Did he think Harry was… Yes, he had been disturbed by how Quora had abandoned the kids to the aurors, how he had killed Thalia himself, even when he spoke so well of her, but…

This was his chance, wasn’t it? All he had to do was take it.

“It’s not myself I’m worried about,” he said, and he didn’t have to force his voice to quiet.

Even Quora with all his masks couldn’t hide the gleam in his eyes. Triumph? Interest? Whatever it
was, Harry wished he could feel like it was a success. The die was cast, now. No going back.

But before they could go on, Quora held up a hand, and gestured towards Harry’s seat. Harry turned his head just in time to see someone coming through—another seventh year. The same girl who had leant Harry the practice snitch, he realized, which he still needed to return. He retreated to the spot between the bookshelves as Quora summoned the student a chair, and picked up his book again, though it was difficult to even pretend to read. What terrible timing he had—now he had to wait.

The girl remained at Quora’s desk, peppering him with questions, for the rest of the rest of the hour, and even several minutes after the five o’clock bell rang. Eventually Quora cut her off. “Books, Miss Gill, will be of more use to you than I am. I will give you a pass through this weekend, if you are interested in pursuing it further, but if you intend to pursue this for your paper, then I would advise you to wait until the Easter Holiday.”

“I… yes, I will do that. Thank you, sir.”

She stood, gathering her things, and Harry stood too, though he realized it was a bit pre-emptive. She started when she turned around, and then gave him a strange look before hurrying out. For a moment, Harry felt the urge to follow her. It was, after all, the end of the hour, and he wasn’t obligated to remain. That was a terrible idea, of course, though maybe not as terrible as the one he’d already acted on. He forced himself to turn towards the desk, where Quora was again clearing his things.

“Sit,” the man said, gesturing to the vacated chair in front of his desk. This one, Harry noticed with something like relief, didn’t have arm rests. How strange that he was preparing to treat with the enemy, essentially, but the design of a piece of furniture was still enough to provide him some relief.

“So?” Quora said when Harry was settled. “You’ve made your decision.”

“I’m considering it,” Harry corrected cautiously.

“Considering it? I think not. You’ve found something you want badly enough that you’ve been squirming in your seat in anticipation, wondering if it is within your grasp. Staring at me most unsubtly, when you’ve failed to distract yourself. Your mind is made up.”

“…It’s not an easy bargain.”

Quora’s lips were thinning. Impatient. Careful, Harry. “If it were, it wouldn’t be worth making. Speak.”

Easy for him to say. Harry was occluding very carefully against himself, and yet still he felt the anxiety clawing at his chest, eager to take control and send him running out of the room. He wouldn’t let it. What was the point? So long as he stuck to what he had decided on, the worst that would happen would be for Quora to say no. Then Harry would say ‘no’ as well, not bending his terms at all, and it would all be over—and in some ways, that would be better, wouldn’t it?

Not all ways, though. He peeled his dry lips apart to lick the chapped skin, and while his mouth was open, forced himself to speak.

“What it would take for me to agree to… work for you,” he began, pacing himself to keep his voice steady, “Would be to be the last one of Hogwarts age or younger to be involved.”

Quora raised an eyebrow. “Elaborate.”

Not an out-of-hand rejection. That was a good sign, right?
“I told you before I… it makes me sick, the way you’ve brought kids into this conflict,” he went on, picking up speed. “Especially children you don’t think twice about leaving in Azkaban. Or killing.” He swallowed. “And you’re here, at least partially, to scope out potential—to recruit.”

He paused, finding it difficult to look at Quora, whose face might as well have been made of stone. He looked down at his hands, folded in his lap, and rearranged them so he didn’t have to see the words carved into his skin, either.

“So my terms are… I would agree to be one of your… Death Eaters. If you don’t recruit anyone who is at Hogwarts, or who could be. Don’t recruit, or try to make use of people who you haven’t recruited, like… like you’ve been using me, even though I’ve not agreed to it. So don’t recruit, and don’t use.”

Quora tilted his head ever so slightly. “You think highly of yourself. To stand in for all your contemporaries.”

“I don’t exactly agree with your movement, or your means. If I were going to work for you, and you’ve made a point that it has to be willing agreement, then it would have to be worth it.”

“You do realize that anyone under seventeen is practically worthless to me anyways. The trace limits them too greatly.”

“I don’t doubt you could find use for them anyways. It hasn’t stopped you from trying to train a houseful of child soldiers. And I… ‘Hogwarts Age’ is up to eighteen, for some.”

“Yet you do not care if on the day following graduation I call on every one of them to swear themselves to my service or die?”

“Of course I care,” Harry retorted. “If you’re going to be like that, then there’s no point to this.” He cut off, realizing he’d let the tension break through, and pushed it down again. Away, away. “Anyways, the fact of the matter is I can’t make other people’s minds up for them. Only… delay the possibility.”

“You have a queer sort of morals,” Quora said after a moment. “And it is worth it to you, that you would stand in their place, take on the, ah, risk, of being a member of that group you think needs protection from me, becoming a Death Eater? Regardless of your feelings towards the movement, I expect complete and utter obedience and loyalty from anyone in my service. And you have seen who I deal with those who fail to meet my expectations.”

“I have. I… it’s a job.”

“A job in which you will regularly be engaging in illegal activities,” Quora said. “A job where your morals come a distant second to my command. A job which you believe to be one too terrible to allow any innocent to sign to. A job working for the Dark Lord, in open rebellion against the government.”

“If you don’t want me, then it saves us both the trouble,” Harry pointed out, summoning all his courage and occluding everything else. “But if that is the case, then I would greatly appreciate it if you would cease acting as though I owe you something.”

“Owe me something?”

“You forced me to sign a contract swearing me to secrecy. No matter how much you talk about needing to join you willingly, it doesn’t line up with what I’ve seen.”
Quora smiled, which was rarely a good sign. “That wasn’t a suggestion that you owed me anything, Mr. Harrigan. That was a quite simple demonstration of power, which you submitted to rather than face a worse outcome. And when I say that you need to join willingly, I do mean it literally. If you are not willing, the magic that would bind you to my service would instead kill you. And it wouldn’t be a pleasant death, either.”

_That_ was a series of ideas that Harry did not want to think about. It seemed this entire plan would be a demonstration of willfully not thinking, or perhaps occluding until it was impossible to tell if there was any of Harry left in there at all.

And he was willing. At this point… it doesn’t matter what he has to do, if he can spare someone else what he has been through.

“But you would risk it,” said Harry. “Even though you seem fine making use of me without me being one of your Death Eaters.”

“Yes. When it comes to powerful individuals, a willing ally is infinitely more useful than a subjugated foe.”

“Powerful?” Harry echoed before he could stop himself. He felt himself flushing, and shook his head sharply. “Well, I’m not the expert in taking over the world, or whatever.”

His diversion did not work. Quora was eyeing him curiously.

“I am curious as to what you see when you look at yourself, Mr. Harrigan,” he said. “I can tell you what your Professors see—a bright young wizard with a future ahead of him. Filius is eager to get you acquainted with a proper dueling master. Clarke sees a potential runes apprentice—she hasn’t taken apprentice in nearly twenty years, preferring to focus her attentions on her classroom, teaching all her students with vigor, but she has been thinking about retiring, and you seem worthy excuse. Horace thinks that you have a future ahead of you, and is doing everything to lay some claim to your success, even if you have been dodging his little _club_ with unusual success.

“And Dumbledore has gone so far as to assist you in placement at the OMRL. He may speak as though it is a selfless act, but that is how he secures loyalty, to twist to his purpose. He’ll have some use for you down the line. Perhaps he even intends to use you against me.”

Quora paused, and Harry forced himself to leave his mouth dry. Quora didn’t even know the half of what Dumbledore wanted from him. That he’d already made a move—that meeting almost a month ago, which had led to that first _cruciatus_ Quora had cast on him, nearly forgotten after everything that had happened the next day, and everything since. And since then, Harry had…

No. He refused to look at this as giving up on finding a way home. At the first sign of an opportunity, he would be gone—he just couldn’t sit by and do nothing. Not while he had this chance, and not while it felt so hopeless.

“Does Dumbledore even know?” Quora asked softly, and Harry blinked. Know what? That Quora was—no, of course he didn’t know who Quora really was; he’d have never let him into the castle. Know that Harry was at risk of being recruited to the other side? Well, he’d probably thought about the danger—if what Harry knew got into the wrong hands—but Harry would burn the book with the words to unlock the spell before he let that happen. Severus was making good progress with that, thankfully…

“Know what?” Harry asked.
“Of your gift,” Quora said, almost impatiently. Then he paused for a moment, and the expression that came onto his face was almost a sneer. “Come now, Harrigan. You must understand the potential of magemetry? Combined with the raw power you have at your disposal, and a passable talent at—this is news to you?”

He looked so earnestly puzzled Harry wondered if he was actually seeing a moment of truth. “I don’t see it as a gift, no,” he said slowly. “Not when it is such a… weakness.”

“Weaknesses can be trained out, or compensated for,” Quora said. Now Harry recognized it—that expression Quora was wearing, the way he was looking at Harry, like he was a perfectly ordinary dog who had suddenly stood up on his hind legs, donned a robe, and started up a debate about complex alchemical exchange theories. “I had thought you kept it secret to increase the advantage it gives you, but you… you’re actually ashamed of it, aren’t you?”

Harry squirmed in his seat. “It is tactically advantageous when people don’t know. They can’t try to use it against me, and don’t realize they can’t get the drop on me.”

“You hide it because people don’t like different, and you’re more concerned with avoiding other’s displeasure than taking advantage of your own abilities,” Quora went on, ignoring him. He shook his head, as though in disbelief that anyone could possibly think like that.

Of course. It wasn’t as though he would understand not wanting power.

“I thought we were talking about Dumbledore.”

“Ah, yes,” said Quora. “So, does he know? You came to him for help. Did you trust him with that detail?”

For a moment, Harry considered saying ‘yes’, and going to Dumbledore as soon as he could and confessing it. But Quora was right about Dumbledore wanting to use him, and that… that would only make things worse. Maybe he intended Dumbledore to use him. Or maybe he would like Dumbledore to know, just to have snatched a more valuable tool out of his grasp. In any case, now that Harry was here, offering himself up to join the Death Eaters. He didn’t think there would be any meetings with Dumbledore any time soon where Harry had the spare willpower to do more than carefully guard this new secret.

“No,” he said finally, shaping his words as carefully as he could. “I didn’t tell him. If anyone else did, I haven’t heard about it.”

“Anyone else? The coven—they knew?”

Harry shrugged. He had time to think when it came to matters of his backstory, time to turn twist things about so they were forms of the truth. It sounded horribly, well, Slytherin, but he was playing on a Slytherin’s field.

“It was… never an issue until shortly before I started school here,” he said.

Quora was leaning forward a bit in his chair. He’d spotted the opening, and seen Harry’s uncommon willingness to share, and if this had been some plan of Harry’s he would have been pulling it off… well, better than anything he’d actually intended.

But he hadn’t, and after a moment, Quora seemed to decide to let the matter drop.

“Very well,” said Quora, and he glanced as the clock. “As for the rest—well, the path forward is straightforward. I have a letter to send to arrange things, and tomorrow evening you will attend to
Malfoy Manor with me, where we shall smoothen out the details of this agreement and formalize the contract. And then you will take your oath.”

Another contract? Harry swallowed—at least this one he was actually agreeing to sign. “Tomorrow evening?”

“To curb your anticipation,” Quora said, and it wasn’t entirely mocking. “Besides, your anonymity will prove useful, for the time being. Sunday would be too public an event.”

Sunday…? The meeting, Harry realized. Better tomorrow, yes—he could only hope Quora didn’t take advantage of the day he had between now and then to do some last-minute recruiting.

“And after that?” Harry dared to ask.

Quora’s teeth showed when he smiled. They were uneven, something of a rarity in the wizarding world where it took ten minutes and a spell to even them out. “Perhaps you should have accepted my generous offer at the New Year, Mr. Harrigan,” he said. “I expect you at my door at six o’clock sharp tomorrow. Until then? I’ve seen quite enough of you for one day.”

Harry could take a hint. It was all he could do not to jump to his feet and sprint out the door. If he had, he wouldn’t have noticed his bag, still leaning against the chair tucked into the bookshelves.

Quora was already summoning a folio from the shelves as Harry slung the bag over his shoulder. “Do get some sleep, Harry,” the man added, not looking up. “You’ll want your energy.”

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It was something of a relief to have actually put his plan into action, but Harry couldn’t bear the thought of dinner for all the thoughts of what he’d done vying for airtime in his brain. Instead he returned to the room with the altar. This time he did not shake or cry, but spread his books out around him on the floor and set to work on his homework.

When the bell rang and he realized with a start that it was nearing curfew, he gathered them up again, frowning. Had he ever done this in the future? Buried himself in work to drown out his questionable choices?

No, probably not. Probably the Harry that had existed before the time travel, whoever he was, would have thought he’d gone insane—offering himself up as a Death Eater and then trying to pretend nothing was out of the ordinary by doing his homework… He was getting better at that, though. The nights following the visit to Azkaban had been full of progress on his projects after being woken by the same echoing nightmares. Nothing like trying to charm powder into a specific pattern inside a glass ball to keep him from thinking about anything else. It was almost like occlumency.

He was getting better at that, too.

He had to. He wanted to survive, didn’t he?

He made it back to the tower just before curfew, nearly running into Lucas Boyle as he headed out on patrol. He smiled as Boyle offered up some joke about Harry getting caught out late with a lover, or something, but his mind was blank of everything but the potential solutions to the runic reversal problem Professor Notaro had assigned that morning.
Hector was still up, of course, sitting at the table they’d done their charms homework at the week before, and looked greatly relieved when he saw Harry coming up the steps into the common room. Harry hadn’t been ready to face him. It had been a month, but seeing his friend’s face still triggered that pang of guilt in his chest—

Runic reversal circles, he thought. Not only to undo a spell; those were easier. These were designed to reverse the meaning entirely. It was like trying to create antonyms, Harry thought, only in runes if there were two opposites forced to work together, the spell was prone to explode…

Pandora was sitting with Hector. It made it a bit easier when Harry was waved over.

“You’re out late again,” Hector said cheerfully. “Still got work to do? You can join us.”

“Nah, said Harry. “I’ve got everything done but Runes. Probably just going to turn in early.”

Quora was right—he did need sleep. Having the null ward on again had made it easier to focus, but even if it had been easier activating it had not been a small feat. And it was only yesterday that he’d been in hospital for overexertion.

“Oh,” said Hector. “Well, if you’re ahead, then nothing to stop you from coming to the revision group tomorrow, right?”

Harry slapped his forehead. Tomorrow! Well, it wasn’t as though he could have told Quora ‘no’. “I—actually, I scheduled something with Quora tomorrow evening. I… I’m sorry. I totally forgot.”

“Quora? I thought you could only work your scheduled times.”

“Oh, um. It’s not work. It’s… The extra credit project I’m doing for Flitwick.”

Another lie to tell, for Quora’s sake. If only Hector knew how terrible of a friend Harry was…

“...with Professor Quora?” Hector asked.

“He’s helping with the, um—I guess you could call it judging? Anyways, I’m just running some ideas by him, make sure nothing I’m toing is going to blow up, or is beyond my ability to cast. I didn’t have anything with me today, but he agreed to give me some of his time tomorrow evening.”

“Oh,” Hector looked much less excited at this point, though he was still smiling. “Well, alright then. Maybe this weekend? It’s Hogsmeade—I was hoping to invite the revision group tomorrow, to all meet up on Saturday—”

“Er,” said Harry. “Actually, I’ve got work on Saturday.”

“Work? He’s not—you’re not excused for Hogsmeade?”

Harry shrugged. “The papers don’t go away.”

“Sunday, then,” said Hector. “I mean, it’s mostly couples out on Sunday, and Pandora and I have the gobstones club tournament in the afternoon, but we could go down to the Three B’s—” He must have caught sight of Harry’s wince, because he stopped. “Not Sunday, either?”

“Sorry. I’ve already got plans. With some of the Slytherins.”

“Slytherins? Again?” Now Hector was scowling. “Look, some of them are okay, but—that time you ate lunch over at their table? You were sitting with Mulciber, Harry. Mulciber. You have to have heard what he did to Norah—”
“I’m sure Harry knows what he’s doing,” Pandora cut in, not looking up from her textbook. “Don’t you, Harry?”

“Yeah,” Harry lied.

Hector didn’t look convinced. Pandora didn’t look up.

It was better this way, Harry thought.

-

“Are you really going Hogsmeade with Regulus?”

Harry looked up in surprise, finding Severus standing above him, his eyes darting over to the clock as they had about once every ten minutes since he had sat down. It was just past five thirty. Still too early to head to Quora’s office, even if he was intent on not being late.

“No, I’m not,” said Harry. “Why do you ask?”

Severus frowned, and sat down, raising a wand to cast muffliato around them before Madam Pince could throw a fit. “I’d heard—I’d heard that’s why Black was after you, Tuesday.”

“Oh. Right. Um… yeah, he’d asked—why didn’t you ask Regulus?”

“I know where Regulus will be on Sunday. You’re the wild card.”

The rally. Right. “I’ll… probably be in the same place. Only not with Regulus.”

Severus blinked, then gaped, then shut his mouth and stared at Harry. “You’re going to the rally?” he said finally. “I… hadn’t realized you’d been…”

“Invited?” Harry asked dryly.

“Yes. You… I haven’t seen you get any more letters from him. Or any sign that you were interested.”

Harry shrugged, looking back down at his book and drawing his eyes across the lines while he forged his lie. Just enough truth. “I’ve been asked to meet someone, someone who’s probably gonna be going to the rally, so I’m probably gonna end up there. The… communication I’ve had since New Years have been… civil. If entirely transparent.” And not civil at all.

Severus was still staring at him. “I’m surprised you aren’t hiding in the kitchens again.”

“I considered it,” Harry said. “But the consequences f not cooperating were made specific, this time. It seemed too much of a hassle.”

He had considered it, but then he’d realized that Quora probably had more authority over the house elves than he had influence, and all he’d have to do was summon one to find out where Harry had tried to hide. The Room of Requirements had seemed a more likely prospect, if he wanted to risk it. Of course, that had been before he’d gone and agreed to… to becoming a Death Eater.

Was he ever going to get used to saying that? He hoped not.
“I think it’s growing on you,” he said. “The movement. I think you’ve thought about what we talked about yesterday—”

“Don’t start that again,” Harry groaned, searching around for an escape. His eyes fell on the book he was holding. “Look I—have you made any progress on researching wards for the book?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “If you’re going to be diversive, don’t be obvious.”

“Well, have you, then?”

“...I have a list, but I haven’t got it with me.”

“Well, bring it to... to class tomorrow, and if we get a few minutes we can compare notes. I’d like to get that out of the way. How... how has occlumency been coming for you? I didn’t ask.”

Severus’s arms folded over his chest. “You mean my deep breathing as I count to ten?” he said caustically. Harry waited. “Fine. It’s... fine.”

Reassuring. “Well, if someone prods you at the rally, think of ABBA.”

“ABBA!”

“I had that song stuck in my head all week after Hector pulled off the illusion. No one will want to go digging around in your head if you’ve got it echoing in there.”

Severus rolled his eyes, though he couldn’t disagree. “Are you coming down to dinner?” he asked, standing.

Harry glanced at the clock again. “No. I’ll get something from Hani later. I want to finish this.”

“Suit yourself.”

He dismissed the muffliato, and Harry watched him leave the library. He had to wait until at least five forty-five, he told himself; he wouldn’t want to seem excessively eager or nervous, even if he couldn’t think of anything that would be more soothing than having this whole mess over and done with. And if he checked the clock after every other sentence—well, Quora wasn’t here. And time remained at its constant, unidirectional, unbearably slow and terrifyingly fast pace.

In his attentiveness, he arrived at Quora’s office at precisely six o’clock. The door was open, and Quora was standing behind his desk, directing a pile of papers to sort themselves before falling into place in a folio and zooming off towards one of the bookshelves. He looked up as the bells stopped ringing.

“You’ll want to leave your bag here,” he said. “Set it down, come here, and we’ll be off.”

Harry dropped it on his usual chair, and came around the desk. He was surprised, for a moment, when Quora threw the chain of the time turner around his neck rather than offering him the portkey, but an hour and a half earlier and in an office empty of Harry’s bag the portkey followed.

“How is your apparition coming along?” Quora asked as Harry grabbed the table in the unnaturally dusty house, willing himself to stay upright.

“...I’ve had one lesson, sir.”

“And?”
And it had been a nightmare. The witch the ministry had sent to teach them might very well have been reading a pamphlet advertising the course for the lack of anything specific she’d told them. About half the students had been spinning in circles to no results at all, and the other half had—well, the hoops they’d set up for the training session had at least directed the magic from one to the other, but no one had actually managed it, that first session. That meant there was a ton of free magic floating around, and they’d been held in the Great Hall, which already had all sorts of residual magic, not to mention the enchanted ceiling and the kitchens below. When he’d puked, the ministry witch had assured him it was a perfectly normal reaction and meant he was making good progress. Harry didn’t bother correcting her.

“I’m sure I’ll get the hang of it,” he said, the residual of the portkey twisting his stomach and his mind. “Someday. Possibly. Before I die, even.”

Quora sighed, and gestured for Harry’s arm, grabbing it tightly and spinning on heel without giving Harry time to adjust prepare himself. He just managed to stay on his feet when they landed, dizzy from the sensation of being pulled forcibly through wards that were designed to reject him and the actual burst of magic, though he stumbled the moment Quora let go. He didn’t fall, however, which was probably for the best, as they were in a long room that on first glance looked slightly familiar—oh. It was the room Harry and Severus had arrived in by floo, back on Halloween. It seemed somewhat smaller, but that might have been a trick of the light, or that Harry was too disoriented to be awed by the grandeur.

Quora looked back at him, and there must have been something written on Harry’s face, because he shook his head. “Look on the bright side, Mr. Harrigan. Having side-along experience should help you progress faster. Come along.”

“I doubt anyone’s going to be making any progress at all, with the person they’ve sent to teach us,” Harry said, hurrying to follow the man out into the hall. They turned right, rather than left, which Harry realized fairly quickly led away from the foyer and the ballroom. Quora, at least, knew exactly where they were going, as he passed by doors and navigated turns with absolute confidence.

“The ministry’s current standards for education are somewhat appalling,” Quora agreed. “I doubt they have changed the curriculum since I was in school. Is it still the ‘three Ds’ they talk about?”

"Destination, determination, deliberation," Harry droned.

“Indeed. I had already taken it upon myself to learn, under some… less kosher guidance.”

“...what?”

Quora pause in front of a door he was opening (which seemed to lead into another hall) and looked down at Harry. After a moment, he shook his head. “It might prove effective with you, but there are quite simply not enough hours in the day, Mr. Harrigan,” he said, shaking his head and hurrying on.

Harry thought that was a rather odd thing to say. Oh, he understood the sentiment, especially after his time at the OMRL, but… “So says the man who chose to become a teacher. And has access to a time turner.”

“A short-term position for long-term gains,” Quora said dismissively. “Better to instill some decent habits when a child is young than to try and change their ways as adults. Through here.”

Harry followed him through another door, into another hallway, but he didn’t waste time wondering over the sheer scale of this place when that throw-away statement had signified something he’d never realized. “You—you’re not just there to observe, you… You actually want to teach, to—“
But as full of potential as the revelation was, he cut off, pivoting sharply about, as even through the
null ward he could feel another presence. His eyes fell on Abraxas Malfoy, much closer than Harry
had previously seen him, coming out a door they’d already passed. It was a shock, seeing the signs
of exhaustion on the proud man so clearly: the darkened bags under his watery grey eyes, the layers
of black and grey robes he had swathed himself in (more to bulk out his nearly skeletal figure than
for warmth, Harry guessed), the lank state of his white-blond hair, cut to fall just shy of the collar of
his robes. He stepped forward, laughing humorlessly.

“So this is your little project?” he said, eyeing Harry like he were a display in a shop, not a person. “I
can comprehend your investment, looking at him, but hearing his voice does make me rather
question your sanity.”

Quora turned too, which Harry only noticed because his hand gripped Harry by the shoulder, hard
enough to keep him still when he might have jumped. “Your standards have always reached
insurmountable heights, my friend,” he said, and it sounded sarcastic, though which part Harry could
not—‘Besides, you’ve misplaced your glasses again. No wonder you are lost. Are we not meeting in
your study? Perhaps we should have the elves guide you.’

“I can see well enough without them to know you look ridiculous, although I haven’t misplaced
anything. They are right here,” Abraxas sniffed, and he drew a pair of spectacles with small circular
lenses framed in silver wire and perched them on the bridge of his tall nose. Even so, he barely
glanced at Harry as he moved past in his slow, deliberate walk. “The study, yes. Hoddle! Bring
wine.”

“I do have to return to the school in an hour,” Quora said, apparently used to abrupt shifts to shouting
orders into the air. He released Harry’s shoulder, falling in step with Malfoy, much slower than
they’d been moving before. Harry followed, eyeing them, trying to comprehend Abraxas’s role in all
of this. He hardly seemed the sort to treat any as an equal, and yet he seemed unbothered by
Abraxas’s harshness, and matched his pace, rather than the other way around.

Abraxas snorted. “The school. Whiskey, then.”

He led the way around a corner and through another door, which finally opened up into a study. It
was a dark room with tall ceilings, kept warm by a fire that seemed to grow as they stepped inside.
Abraxas frowned and waved a wand, and sets of thick curtains rolled themselves back, revealing
windows that reached nearly to the ceiling, letting in the last of the day’s cold, cloud-filtered light.
The grounds of Malfoy Manor were greyed with a lingering freeze, though Harry seemed to recall it
being somewhere in the south. Quora gestured him towards a chair upholstered in black leather as he
went to the side table. A decanter and three crystal glasses were waiting for him, and a jar of ice that
had been formed or charmed into perfect globes, a pair of sugar tongs perched. He ignored the tongs,
adding a single sphere of ice to one of the glasses, and poured whisky into that and another. The one
with ice he kept for himself, while the other he set on the desk ahead of where Abraxas was settling
into a wingback swivel chair, a blanket unfolding itself from a shelf beside the fire and settling across
his lap.

“So,” said Abraxas, leaning back and eyeing Harry again. “You think he will be of use to you?”

Harry blinked, but Voldemort spoke—and it was Voldemort, Harry realized; a glamor had slipped
into place over his face and hair. “You only question him now seeing that he’s a redhead,” the Dark
Lord said mildly, settling into a third chair, crossing one knee over the other. He wasn’t behind the
desk, but he certainly sat as though he owned the place. He glanced over at Harry, tilting his glass so
the ice moved about. “Lord Malfoy has an aesthetic fixation, I am afraid, Mr. Harrigan. Never mind
the hair, Brax; he’ll have a hood when you see him next.”
Abraxas sighed, though he let an arm drop to open one of the desk drawers and withdrew a single piece of parchment from it. “It is not the hair that bothers me. Nor the freckles, unsightly though they are. I wonder at his…” He cut off, flicking his eyes up and down Harry, as though he couldn’t decide on one thing to point out. But he also pushed the parchment towards Harry across the desk. The chair Voldemort had directed him to was impractical for this; Harry had to scoot forward to the front edge to reach the page, and bring it off the surface to look at it.

“Your contract, as it stands now,” Abraxas said lazily, letting his head fall back against the seat and closing his eyes. “I advise you to read it carefully. If you can read, that is.”

“I’m beginning to wonder you are more interested in insulting me or him,” Voldemort said, but Abraxas did not reply. Harry quickly turned his attention down to the parchment.

The contract was brief:

The following is a contract of service between one: the Dark Lord known as Lord Voldemort and one: Dudley Harrigan, to be witnessed by Lord Abraxas Malfoy, which will come in effect at the time of signing on this the 10th of February, 1977, and be enforced by the rule of magic.

By D. Harrigan’s terms, for the duration in which the conditions outlined in this contract are met, Lord Voldemort shall make no attempts to:

1. recruit or coerce into his service any other student of Hogwarts nor person of Hogwarts-attending age.
2. make use of any who fall into that category as though they had committed themselves to his service if they have not been.

By Lord Voldemort’s terms, for the duration in which the conditions outlined in this contract are met, D. Harrigan shall:

1. to the best of his capabilities faithfully serve Lord Voldemort.
2. bear the title, responsibilities, and Dark Mark of a Death Eater.

The parties who sign this contract shall agree to carry out these term and not willfully break them. The one who does so will forfeit his right to magic to the other.

“We will not be removing anyone from our service by this agreement, so the wording must flexible enough to allow the continued relationship between our Lord and his vassals,” Abraxas said dryly, taking a sip of his drink. He had his head up, watching Harry again, grey eyes narrow, not like he was trying to make sense of him, but like… like he knew him already. Like he was testing him.

Harry looked down at the page again, unsettled. This was what he had wanted, wasn’t it? No attempts to recruit or coerce into his service… But perhaps…

“If you are having second thoughts,” said Voldemort. “You had best speak them quickly.”
“Not second thoughts, precisely,” Harry managed. “Only… the wording…” There was something off about it.

“The wording?”

Harry bit the inside of his cheek. It was difficult to focus, with him looking like that and Abraxas watching him. He tried to sort his thoughts out, and landed on—“Well, it leaves things a bit too flexible. What’s to stop him—er, you, Mr. Malfoy—from doing the recruiting for you?”

Voldemort waved his hand lazily and the contract slipped from his fingers, hovering in the air in front of him. He scanned it for a moment, then waved his hand again, directing it towards Abraxas. “So it does. What do you think, Brax? ‘Neither Lord Voldemort nor any Death Eater’…?”

“That is too restrictive. Several of our members have younger siblings, and it could be read that by talking to them in a way that encourages them, even when they are not of age…”

“Ah. Problematic indeed. Then: Lord Voldemort shall make no attempts nor appoint any others to…” and so forth.”

Abraxas twisted his quill about in his hands, considering the words. Harry did as well. He preferred the wording Voldemort had first proposed, but like this—well, while the second clause of the contract stopped kids from being used as Death Eaters when they were not, adults were another matter. He cleared his throat.

Neither Lord Voldemort nor… anyone acting in his stead shall make any attempts or appoint anyone else.”

Abraxas raised an eyebrow, but glanced at Voldemort, who considered it. “Very well,” he said. “Abraxas, does that phrasing suit?”

“Well enough. Although I should add ‘truly’, or perhaps ‘any in his service’, rather than anyone. I would not put it past the Ministry to attempt entrapment.”

“Perhaps. Make the changes, if you would.”

Abraxas tapped the page with his wand, and the words wiggled out of the way, leaving him enough space to adjust the first line. He gave it a moment more to dry, then passed it back to Harry. “Any other quibbles, Mr. Harrigan?”

Harry couldn’t be sure that he was being mocked, so he merely looked down at the page again. “Neither Lord Voldemort, nor any in his service acting in his stead, shall make any attempts or appoint any others to”, it now read. There was still something off, but Harry couldn’t put a finger on what. Possibly the whole prospect of him agreeing to Voldemort’s service.

“And ‘faithfully’, he said. “Cut that.”

“He asks much,” Abraxas said, though he waved his wand, and the word vanished, the rest of the line moving back into place.

“He is a Ravenclaw,” Voldemort said. “The candor is refreshing.”

Abraxas grunted. “Are you satisfied, Mr. Harrigan?”

Harry looked at the words, and once again was struck by the notion that this was a terrible idea. But Voldemort seemed to be in a good mood, and Harry wasn’t going to back out now—in for a sickle,
in for a galleon—“Yes,” he said, setting the parchment down on the desk again.

“Then we sign,” said Abraxas, and he pulled the parchment towards him, producing a quill from his desk and scratching directly onto the page. Without dipping it in ink, Harry realized, although it was clearly writing with something. He pushed the parchment towards Voldemort next, and Voldemort actually charmed the quill clean before he signed, and again before he passed it to Harry.

A blood quill, Harry realized, looking down at the two signatures: Lord Abraxas Malfoy and Lord Voldemort quickly-drying stains against the parchment. He could only hope that this one would not cut the words he wrote into the back of his hand, although I must not tell lies Dudley Harrigan would be an ironic turn of events. He doubted, however, the either of the two men would have signed if it did, and, reminded that they were both there, quickly signed his name in the appropriate spot.

It wasn’t just blood the quill pulled from him. Magic, too, imbued the page as he wrote. He was assaulted by the image of the nib breaking, and draining both blood and magic from his body, and quickly set the quill aside, pushing it and the contract back towards the center of the desk.

Abraxas examined it closely and, apparently satisfied, flicked his wand at the parchment, which rolled up into a scroll, tying off with a ribbon that materialized up out of the air, and shot off across the room towards one of the bookshelves, slotting itself in among a pile of other scrolls. Were those all contracts of people who had become Death Eaters? Merlin—

“And now,” Abraxas said. “I suppose we see whether it matters at all, as there is no guarantee the mark will take at all.”

“It will take,” said Voldemort, apparently untroubled by the magic sparking up through his hand. “Your arm, Harry—your left arm, as you are right-handed. Roll up your sleeve, and remove that ward of yours—you should have a look at that, Abraxas.”

Harry didn’t like uncoiling the ward from his wrist, and he had to close his eyes to bear the magic suddenly pushing in from all around him. The scrolls on the shelf—not all, but several imprints of Voldemort’s magic, running through the words he’d signed. There were wards over several of the cases, and the drawers of Abraxas’s desk, and the windows, and still more magic beyond these walls—Malfoy Manor was full of spells and dark things—

Voldemort’s fingers brushed Harry’s as he reached forward to take the beads from him, sending a shock up his arm at that overwhelming, familiar, enticing magic. Harry’s eyes flashed open. He resisted the urge jump up and snatch the ward as he saw it being passed to Abraxas, and busied himself with the button on the cuff of his left sleeve instead, folding the thick black cloth of his robe up past his elbow and beginning to roll the sweater underneath. He wasn’t sure how far—he wasn’t even entirely sure what he was getting himself into. He had the scar running from the top of his right forearm already, and a vague notion that it had been given to him in a dark ritual… was this the same? This ‘dark mark’?

After a moment Voldemort grabbed his wrist, pushing the sleeve up the rest of the way. Harry squirmed. Magic was always more—intense, when there was direct contact, and Voldemort’s was bad enough without it, and he hadn’t had enough time to readjust to the removal of the ward…

“This will hurt,” said Voldemort. Not a warning so much as a promise. He rested the tip of his wand on the bare skin. There was a glint in his eye—the light of the fire, logically, but it made Harry’s breath come up short. “Possibly more for you. Chirurgius diffindo.”

It was lucky, perhaps, that Voldemort’s grip on his wrist was tight, as Harry started as he heard the
incantation and tried to wrench his arm away, recognizing a modified severing charm. Had he succeeded, the gash might have been deadly; as it was the spell clove his skin apart, leaving a clean six-inch split in a straight line down the center of his forearm. It was disgusting, and stung—but no more than pinpricks. He looked up at Voldemort in confusion, but the man was still focusing, and pressed the tip of his wand into the wound. Harry let out a hiss—it stung—but Voldemort ignored him and dragged the wand in a figure eight down and across the arm, a pulse of magic drawing a trail of blood along with it, stark and red against his skin.

“Remember,” the Dark Lord said, ending the pattern and dragging his wand down the cut again, letting it rest just above Harry’s wrist. “You must take it willingly… Stigmus Morsmordre!”

Willingly—he might have well been telling Harry to cast the cruciatus on himself, or shove his arm into the fire, because that’s what it felt like. He could feel Voldemort’s magic searing into his skin, following the pattern the blood had marked, not just through magemetry but through the nerves burning hot on his arm. Voldemort’s grip felt icy, but he did not let go, and with all the magic wrapping itself tight into knots Harry did not think he could move his arm anyways. And then the magic began to coalesce into one form, an inky darkness that Harry could actually see, and it sunk into the gash, spreading out again once it was beyond it spread, and it felt as though there was molten iron filling in the space, but still Voldemort did not let go—and the darkness was rising up through his skin and turning it black—and Harry had felt pain in his life, but never like this—you must take it willingly—he gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut though behind them it still seemed terribly bright—he wanted this, he would endure, he would be marked because that was the bargain they had struck—

When it was over, Voldemort let go of Harry’s wrist, and his arm knocked against the chair as though it had been filled with lead. Harry did not open his eyes, not just yet, not when the pain was still radiating out and he could feel it there. It, a layer of magic fused not only to his arm and his blood but his own magic, he just knew—it, tiny fragment of Voldemort’s power, embedded in his arm. The Dark Mark, the contract had called it, and now Harry understood, because this was the Dark Lord’s magic twisting his own to it’s will. It was separate from the man, but it was still his, and there were the threads to prove it, tying Harry to him, and to Abraxas, he realized, and spiraling out in fractals different directions.

He finally opened his eyes as he heard the clink of glass. Voldemort had stood, and was pouring himself a new glass of whisky, a fresh sphere of ice bobbing in place, and was speaking, though Harry had to focus to make sense of the words.

"I did tell you, Brax," he was saying. "I am always certain. It is when we let others bring them forward that the mark does not take."

"Perhaps. But there are standards to be upheld..."

"I will not offer it to anyone on virtue of a name. Power, cunning, intelligence, talent... Those are what will matter. The mark is an honor, not a right."

He sat back down, firelight glinting off the whisky, and Harry realized with a start that the room had grown darker. A glance towards the window showed that night had fallen swiftly. Sunset had been only an hour past when they had left the castle, so it would be soon. Harry swallowed, trying to wet his dry mouth. Less than an hour, he only had to keep himself composed for that long...

Voldemort seemed to have noticed Harry's re-engagement, as he looked at him, pensive. "Besides, Mr. Harrigan’s reaction was in part due to other factors, wasn't it? Tell me, Harry. How does it feel?"

Harry licked his lips and finally looked down at his arm. It felt as though it had been battered within
Voldemort had asked him a question. Obedience, he had to play that part. He had signed up for this—gone into it willingly. He cleared his throat.

"Like a bug caught in a web fill of them," he said. His voice was hoarse. Had he screamed? He didn't recall. "May I have the ward back?"

"May I have it back, my lord," Abraxas corrected, but Voldemort was still looking thoughtful. He picked up the beads, but did not hand them over.

"Can you, ah, observe the connection?" he asked.

"Yes," said Harry. "He—Mr. Malfoy has one, too. I... I hadn’t known what it was before; now it is clear. And... Someone else in the house has it too. And..."

Abraxas raised an eyebrow, and for the first time looked like he was actually interested in what Harry had to say. Not that Harry had any reason to care what the Lord Malfoy thought of him, but Voldemort clearly valued his opinion. “That would be Lucius, I suppose,” he said. “I hadn’t realized he was coming home this evening.”

Harry paused, focusing on that thread a bit harder, pushing back the spot of Voldemort’s magic and—yes. He’d only met Lucius the once, but it felt familiar. However… “There’s someone else with him, too.”

“Not marked?” Voldemort asked.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t recognize them. Adult, probably. Controlled.”

“Cygnus’s daughter, perhaps? I have heard he’s been calling on her.”

Abraxas hummed. “I suppose. The youngest one, to everyone’s relief.”

“Is Cygnus still looking for suitors for, ah, Andromeda? Stubborn man.”

“Quite. He’s deluded himself into believing anyone he cares for would marry a blood-traitor with a halfblood child, even if she did come to her senses.”

“Has Lucius said whether Narcissa is in contact with her? Regardless of the girl’s choice, if the child really is a metamorphmagus… if Andromeda could be brought around…”

A what…? The term sounded familiar, but Harry couldn’t place it.

“I doubt that. I’ve heard that her mudblood husband has an offer for a job in America, where she’ll no doubt follow him.”

“Well. Perhaps the Blacks would not be too horribly opposed to an accident in their travel plans, if the child was brought back into the family where it belongs,” he said, and he said it so casually it took Harry a moment to realize he was suggesting murder. “But we wouldn’t want to get in the way
of Lucius’s overtures. They are keeping him happy.”

“They are, aren’t they? Of course he won’t tell me anything. He likes to imagine that his behavior is some sort of rebellion in the face of us old men. Wait until I’m gone!”

Abraxas wheezed out a laugh, which descended into a coughing fit. Voldemort showed no sign of being affected by the grating sound, and Harry did his best not to squirm too obviously in his seat. It sounded like death—and felt like it, too. Whatever his illness, it wasn’t just his body suffering. With every rasping cough his magic fluttered helplessly about, straining to provide relief to the body but not being able to connect to it.

When the shudders receded, Abraxas looked even more exhausted than before, but also more spiteful. He shook his head. “No, I won’t be leaving that boy to make a mess of all this, not for many years, if I’ve anything to say about it. Has the stubbornness of an ass, that one.”

“Well, he had to get something of you,” Voldemort said. “Better stubborn and a fool than weak-willed like his mother, I would expect.”

Abraxas laughed again, which struck Harry as odd, as it was, theoretically, his wife the man was insulting. “I’ve lost respect for her the longer this illness has gone on. As mother always said, the main line of the Rosiers is the withering flower, the branch is the tough stem lined with thorns.”

“Yes, well, I doubt dear Lucius could handle a woman like your mother.”

“There is some relief that he’s gone for Narcissa, not Bellatrix.”

“Yes,” Voldemort agreed. There was a lull in the conversation, and then Voldemort finally handed the beads over to Harry. He wrapped them quickly around his wrist, breathing with relief as it cut him off from both his and Abraxas’s magic, irritating for different reasons. “Does the ward block the connection?” the man asked, before Harry could even look up again.

Block? “No,” Harry said, examining the space around the mark—not the mark itself; that he didn’t want to get caught looking at. “No, there’s… The clause I put in, to stop it from breaking, it creates… gaps, if there’s something too strong for it to contain. It’s left a hole around the connection, sort of. Not the best description, but…”

“Good,” said Voldemort. “It would be unfortunate if I had to order you never to wear it, after all the effort you put into it. But the mark would be quite pointless if it were cut off.”

Harry swallowed, realizing that the man could order him not to wear it, and he’d have to obey, or the deal would be up. He pushed his sleeve back down, trying and failing not to wince as he did so—the skin felt bruised and sunburned both, and even the slightest jostling sent fire up his bones.

“Curious, that gift,” said Abraxas, and Harry glanced up again. “Is it from a family line?”

After a moment, Harry realized Abraxas actually wanted him to answer. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Ah, yes. The mysterious past.” Harry didn’t think Abraxas could say anything with more sarcasm. “Perhaps you ought to research bloodline tests, boy. Or pay the goblins to do it for you, if you can’t be bothered.”

Pay the goblins? With what money? Besides, it was probably better he didn’t know, just in case… “Perhaps,” he echoed.

“I doubt it would help,” Voldemort said. “Unchecked magemetry has in all recorded cases driven the
patients insane. If there were a family with a knack for it, it would be far too closely guarded a secret for Harry to expect to benefit, half-blood and muggle-raised as he is.” He paused. “Perhaps Narcissa would be interested in raising her sister’s child, if tragedy were to befall the family? I can’t imagine Cygnus taking it, regardless of metamorphmagus ability. But Narcissa is a Black, and if she took it in…”

“You forget that would potentially put the child under Lucius’s parentage, if he has his way. I’d sooner trust the mudblood with a child than my son.”

“Better he than dear Bella,” Voldemort said, and he set the whisky glass aside and stood up. “The child would be dead within the week. Come, Harry; it is time for us to return to the school.”

Harry stood as well, and Abraxas gestured to the fireplace without moving an inch. There was a pot of floo powder on the mantle—why hadn’t they flooed directly to the study to begin with? “Until Sunday, then,” the man rasped. “I can hardly contain my excitement.”

Voldemort laughs, once. “Yes, well. You and Mr Harrigan both.”

Chapter End Notes

On the bright side, I managed another post in December! On the downside, it is because the will to write has entirely disappeared, which is... quite inconvenient, leaving my NaNo sitting at 25,000 words. Well.

Sorry, Harry! I think we have now proven that you only dwell on the extremes of life choices... and how this one will play out....

Also, there is something that I think is rather clever going on here. It is not directly mentioned within the scope of this story, so I'm curious to see if anyone picks up on it. Its one of those things that might seem like a plot hole or weak characterization without it, but also... hm, we shall see.

Happy thanksgiving to those who celebrate it!
His arm was burning.

Harry blinked, lifting his head, the stiffness in his neck slowing him down, and something else… a blanket, thrown over his shoulders. A piece of parchment fluttered down from where it had stuck to his cheek, and he stared incomprehensibly at it until he realized his glasses were askew, one rectangular frame balanced on the bridge of his nose, the other sticking off past his temple. He made to push them back into place—

And his breath hissed as he breathed sharply through his teeth.

His arm was burning. The Dark Mark was burning.

The thought, if not the pain, was enough to rouse him entirely.

Harry sat still, training his breathing into even breaths. There was nothing to do but wait, as he’d found out over the last two days. This pulsing (one burn, brief respite; another) was not the same as a call. That was a single, long signal, starting as irritating as an unscratchable itch and growing the longer it took to follow it back to the other end. Quora had demonstrated it Saturday morning. An educational experience, he’d called it. Cat playing with mouse, Harry morbidly supposed.

He closed his eyes, clenching his teeth as the pain flared again. It had been two full days, three nights since their trip to Malfoy Manor, and yet he had not gotten used to the feeling of it. To the magic implanted underneath his skin, tethering him like a leash, not just the pain. Had it just been the tattoo, he could have put it out of his mind, hiding it beneath his sleeve, but this… Even when he was away from Quora, even with the new null ward to stop his magic from seeking him out, now there was no escaping it. No pretending. It was just a symbol, really, of being tied up in the web that he’d been trapped in already, but even when he could not see the mark… there it was.

When the pain finally dulled to a simple ache, Harry re-opened his eyes. His right hand, he realized, was clenched tight over the arm, and he let go slowly, swallowing. Behind him, he heard Hector shift, and glanced over, squinting through the dim; the sky outside was just beginning to lighten after another dark winter night. He found Hector’s face turned his way, peeking out with the quilt and extra blanket wrapped over him, but he was clearly still asleep.

Thank Merlin.

He’d realized, when he was returned to the castle Thursday evening, just how much the Dark Mark bound its bearers to Voldemort. Yes, for him, the magic would serve as a constant reminder, but it was (somewhat surprisingly, considering the source) the more mundane aspect, the tattoo itself, that sparked the realization: every follower bore a permanent declaration of loyalty on their body, in a place that was fairly noticeable if you weren’t wearing robes, or if you forgot and rolled up your sleeve. If the aurors knew about the mark—they had to know, right?—then if you were caught with that sign of sworn loyalty on your arm, that was it. And if Harry was careless, and Hector spotted it, Harry could hardly bear it… Not to mention Dumbledore, for that matter, if he valued his safety. If Dumbledore knew…

Harry slowly pulled the sleeve up, wincing as the fabric brushed the tender skin. It was stark now, the ink seeming to seep out into his blood, but he had noticed that when it wasn’t burning it faded somewhat, looking more like a normal tattoo. He touched it lightly, almost expecting his finger to burn, but the skin felt cool, almost clammy and—
The mark burned again. *Damn it*; he was awake! Quora didn’t strike him as the sort who would preemptively remind someone of an order he’d given; no, this was the same sick game as ever. A power play. Because branding someone with a reminder that they’d sworn loyalty to him wasn’t enough.

“...arry?”

Harry tugged the sleeve down, wide-eyed at the sound and the pain, and turned quickly around, the blanket sliding off his shoulders and onto the floor. Hector was peering out at him, his face still framed by his quilt, blinking slowly.

He hadn’t seen anything. He *couldn’t* have seen anything. Even if he had, he was still half-asleep, and would forget about it. And he probably didn’t know what the Dark Mark was, anyways; Harry had thought the name was a metaphor up until the point it was branded into his skin.

“Go back to sleep,” Harry said softly, smiling the way he smiled at the second-years, when they looked at him like a teacher. “It’s Sunday.”

Hector’s mouth hung slightly open; ‘Sunday’ being far too complex of a topic for his brain to handle. But this was Hector, so of course—“You gonna… bed?”

Harry shook his head, reaching down to pick up the blanket, folding it automatically. “No, I’m up now.”

“...you’re overworking again.”

Harry swallowed as he stood, depositing the blanket on the seat he’d been sitting in, heading to his closet to find something fresh. He wasn’t meeting Quora until a quarter to nine, and it couldn’t even be seven yet, or Hector’s breakfast alarm would have gone off. “Not really,” he said. “I just got caught up on the reversal circles last night, and figured I’d get them done so I didn’t have to worry about it today, since I’m... Hector?”

Hector didn’t respond. From the looks of it, he had already fallen back asleep.

After a moment, Harry turned and went into the bathroom, locking the door and warding it silent as he climbed out of yesterday’s robes. He tried not to look at the mark while he showered, but it was always there in the corner of his eye, a black blur without his glasses. The water helped ease the pain somewhat, as though it really were a burning spot, and the pulsing had let up for the moment. He supposed Quora had gotten bored. Why he thought it necessary to give Harry such a rude awakening… true, Harry hadn’t set any alarm spells, but Quora couldn’t know that. Nor would he ever take on responsibility for someone else’s actions...

After a few minutes standing in front of the mirror wondering if there was any hope for his hair, the shaving spell dusting the sink with patches of orangish fuzz, Harry put his robes to be laundered, pushing the other set over his muggle clothes. If his school robes didn’t fit in with the aesthetic of Malfoy Manor, well, maybe Abraxas would see fit donate some funds to replace Harry’s wardrobe. It had been a year and a half that he’d been stuck here, and what he’d brought with him had been the worst of his clothes to begin with, but Harry couldn’t spare any of his gold for things like that. Especially not with the summer holidays and his hopeful return to the OMRL coming—he doubted there would be another scholarship, so nearly everything he’d received from his first few paychecks had gone first to paying the apparition lesson fee and second to his trunk. He had a handful in his pocket as he let the tower, which was the extent of his spending money.

As he descended the stairs, the bells tolled—seven o’clock. The sconces charmed light as he walked, just enough to keep his path clear, no doubt flickering out behind him. The first times he’d walked
down the halls two summers ago, all alone and confused, the magic had made the candles and torches and lamps along his paths like strikes of lightning. Now, he had the ward again, and they were too small to pick up on at all. He was less alone and less confused, and, he thought idly as he came to the still life guarding the kitchen and tickled the pear to get in, he was practically a different person. He couldn't remember half the things that made him, and he had the Dark Mark branded into his arm. What would the Harry who had shown up in Gryffindor Tower that July—Gryffindor!—think about that?

Probably not much. He hadn't thought much about anything, at least not critically. Or if he had, it was hidden by the obfuscus. There was only so much to go by.

Maybe he'd have been proud, that Harry, knowing that he'd managed to protect someone while he was being forced down a path he never wished to tread. Several someones, potentially. Maybe he'd have thought it was worth it, what Harry'd gone and done.

There were two other marked Death Eaters at Hogwarts; seventh year Slytherins both. He couldn't avoid sensing them, and he'd even offered up the information of his discovery to Quora without prompting, a conscious action against his own instincts, proof of his value and intention to be a good—ha—Death Eater, upholding his end of the bargain, while reminding Quora of his own. It was more than he'd hoped, but far less than he feared. The thought that he'd spared Severus and Regulus and so many others who might dive into it, at least for a few years, had been enough to get through the misery of Friday, when he'd had class with Quora, and Saturday, when the regular grading session had been punctuated by flares of pain, which Quora said was because the magic was still settling. He could deal with pain, knowing he'd won them that. He could deal with pain, knowing that when he found his way back to the future, there was a chance for him to escape that no one else had.

He just had to bear with it for a while. Follow orders, try not to irritate the Dark Lord too much, occlude, guard his tongue... get through the meeting... hope he wasn’t asked to do anything irredeemable...

On second thought, maybe breakfast wasn’t such a great idea. He hadn’t been paying much attention at the last meeting, and he hadn’t been on the inside, so he had no idea what he was getting into, today.

He was already in the kitchens, though, and he could see Moggy had noticed him and was charming a plate, so he hurried over to stop the progress. “Just tea, I think,” he said. “It’s a little early to eat, still, and... well, it’s Hogsmeade for me today; I’ll probably get all sorts of food when I’m out.”

Moggy nodded, and made him the tea, putting it on a little tray he’d summoned from somewhere as Harry sat in his usual place over by the fire. He also brought toast.

“Master Harry is never eating enough, says Hani,” said Moggy, crossing his little arms over his chest and staring as though daring Harry to argue.

Harry ate the toast. It stayed in his stomach, at least.

He hadn’t brought a book, so he drank his tea slowly, running through a few of the occlumency exercises he knew, checking the time in between. The hour seemed to stretch out on and on, but it was just an illusion, he knew, and every time he checked it his heart began to drum again, knowing it was that much sooner until he would be returning to the mess he had made of reality. He practiced his breathing, but there wasn’t much deeper he could occlude his apprehension than he already was. Maybe there was something wrong with him? Maybe—
He was fine. He just needed to get through this. Once he faced it, he would be fine. He would be fine, or…

Harry drained the last of his tea and stood up. It was early, but Quora would prefer that. And better to start the day on a good note. Before he could lose his nerve, he stood, thanked Moggy, and hurried out.

He came across Quora as the man was just turning into the hall from the next opening, the stairs up from the Great Hall, not seeming to notice Harry as he turned towards the classroom. Did he follow without saying anything? No, that was weird, and what if Quora noticed him? Heard his footsteps, or something—then it would be even weirder.

“Sir,” he finally called out.

Ahead of him, Quora paused, glancing over his shoulder. “Ah, Mr. Harrigan,” he said, stopping more fully and and turning around. Harry hurried to catch up. “Are you ready to head out?”

Harry glanced around the hall, surprised that they were having this conversation here, rather than go into the office, with all his protections and wards. But he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“To Hogsmeade, then,” said Quora, and he turned and began to walk, back towards the stairs he had just come from.

Harry frowned, though he hurried to fall into step as they descended towards the ground floor. “To Hogsmeade, sir?” he asked quietly. He had assumed that they would be taking the usual portkey, though he wasn’t about to ask that in the hall.

“You did have something you needed from the apothecary, did you not?”

Harry blinked. Oh. He had almost forgotten about that—though he had remembered to grab money on the way out. “Yes, sir.”

“After that, we will be apparating to complete our business in London,” Quora said.

London?

There must have been some plan Harry hadn’t been included in. That or he was feeding anyone listening misinformation… or maybe the house was in London? “Right,” he said, trying not to sound too bewildered.

When they got outside, footsteps crunching on Saturday’s snow, Harry wishing he’d grabbed his cloak, Quora spoke again. It was freer speech—though he did cast a spell before he spoke, probably so they could not be overheard. “Officially, you are going to London with me this morning, as I have some business to complete and would like to introduce you to some of my associates, as I now feel a certain sense that my Teaching Assistant might not be so hopeless as I had previously assumed, and am trying to encourage you to look beyond the library.”

“Alright,” Harry said cautiously.

“I am not trying to encourage that,” Quora clarified. He glanced over at Harry, eyes narrow, considering. “It is rather advantageous for you to have a position there, and if you pursue a career there following your graduation, it will be less upsetting to your schedule and services than if you are to start somewhere new.”
Harry didn’t even let his thoughts drift towards the idea of *after graduation* before he reinforced his occlusion. He didn’t know how much Quora was listening, but let himself dwell a bit of irritation that Quora felt the right to arrange his future before he clamped down on that as well, casting about for a fresh topic. “Um… I told Hector that I was going to be busy with some of the Slytherins today.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

“Right,” said Harry. The Slytherins Hector thought he’d be with were probably going to be at the meeting, anyways.

They trudged on in silence for a bit, winding down the path towards the gates. The morning was so quiet and still that even with the null ward and Quora walking beside him, he could feel the school wards as they seemed to sing. He remembered what Notaro had said, what felt like a lifetime ago—though it had only been a few months—about the founders using the old standing stones as anchors for the new wards, so that they were imbued with magic from before history told, and wondered if that was why they affected him so much. Older than Hogwarts, and the magic in the castle was bad enough, if he wasn’t careful.

He eyed the boundary as they got in sight of the gate, searching the air for some visible sign of it. With magic that strong, even human eyes could sometimes see it, and there was bound to be… was that a shimmer?

“Are you not wearing your ward?”

“Huh?” said Harry, tearing his eyes away, startled by Quora’s voice. “Oh, you mean… Yes, I am, only… The Hogwarts wards are…”

“I find mumbling *particularly* loathsome, Mr. Harrigan.”

Harry cleared his throat. “They’re strong, and they’re old. If I reach out too far while meditating, even when I’m sitting in the dorms they can be, um. Hard to comprehend. To get away from.”

Quora glanced over at him. “You can reach out as far as the wards from inside the castle.”

Not a question, nor spoken with any particular inflection that might Have given Harry a cue as to what he was supposed to say. “Yes…?”

“Have you ever tested how far you can reach?”

Harry frowned. “Um… well, I think the only reason I can even, uh, get a grip on the wards is because they’re so strong,” he said. “I mean, if I push out into the forest, I can still technically sense things, but there’s so much… It took me most of last year to be able to deal with the castle at night, even. I had to meditate and sort everything out, bit by bit, so it wasn’t *completely* overwhelming.”

“Daytime is harder?”

“People are awake, and…”

Harry trailed off. They were at the ward. Five more steps, and he’d pass through it.

He’d carved a clause in the new null ward for it not to freeze against his skin anymore, but that meant the ward was pulsing with magic to keep it skin-temperature, and it was straining to hold back the magic of the stronger Hogwarts wards.

“If it would assist you, I can spell your legs so that even if you pass out you keep walking.”
Harry shot Quora his best withering glance. “It would assist me if you don’t ever even suggest doing that again,” he muttered, and marched straight forward, hoping that he didn’t fall flat on his face again this time.

He didn’t. The null ward, by some miracle, held, and when he came out the other side his ears were ringing but he was still vertical and travelling in a mostly straight line. Quora, meanwhile, was chuckling. The bastard.

“It is healthy to remind you what it feels like, since you so masterfully throw off the imperius,” he said. “I find a dose of powerlessness can set most heads straight.”

“As if you wouldn’t kill whoever tried the same thing against you,” Harry said.

And then, as they got a few steps further, and his mind began to clear: regretted saying. There was no limit to his lack of self-preservation, was there?

“Would I?” Quora asked vaguely. “The enticing thing about being in control is that no one else has the right or gall to tell you what to do, and therefore assuming you are self-disciplined—which you would have to be, to reach my position—there is no reason to be reminded.” He glanced over at Harry and, finding how absolutely unimpressed Harry was, seemed to toy with the idea of rolling his eyes for a moment before looking ahead again. “In any case, Mr. Harrigan, all you have to do to avoid a repeat of that is to behave and keep control of yourself, which you should be inclined to do anyways.”

Harry somehow doubted it was so simple. If Quora had any reason at all to believe it more beneficial for Harry not to be able to control his own limbs, then Harry’s protests would be enough ‘misbehaving’ for Quora to have his excuse. If he felt like he needed it. Besides, it wasn’t like he went around asking to be kicked out of his mind… he’d like to see Quora try to manage magemetry…

Scratch that. Quora didn’t need anything else at his command, and if anyone could learn not only to live with it but to control it, it would be him. The wizarding world had enough to deal with without that power being at his fingertips…

Harry swallowed.

He needed to find—no, to forge his way back. For the moment, though, it was as much as he could do to keep himself alive, and to occlude that thought back into the depths with the rest of himself.

They returned to their silence for the rest of the walk down to the village, which Harry was somewhat surprised to find as empty as it was. Of course they had left far ahead of the rest of the students; half the castle wasn’t even awake, let alone prepared to head down to Hogsmeade. But the streets were empty, and only some of the chimneys had smoke rising from them. Quora led the way down the street, and it took longer than it probably should have for Harry to remember they were heading towards the apothecary. In the distance, he could hear the castle bells ringing—nine o’clock.

A witch in plum-colored robes was unlocking the door as they arrived, and looked up at the pair in surprise, glancing between them as though she couldn’t decide where to look. “A little early for a student to be out, isn’t it?” she asked, finally landing her eyes on Harry.

“We are in a bit of a hurry,” Quora said coolly. “If you would be so kind as to continue the opening of your shop.”

“Alright, alright,” she said, and finished unlocking the door, gesturing them inside.
She spelled the lamps on after the door closed behind her, lighting the shop in a warm, greenish glow. Harry had never been to this apothecary, having ordered what he needed for class through the post and borrowed the rest from Slughorn’s stores. Most of the shop was filled with ingredients stored in large glass jars or open bins with scoops, each labeled with what looked like peeling masking tape marked with nearly illegible pointed script, but along one wall to the right were collections of potions in an array of beakers of all different shapes. They didn’t seem to be organized in any particular fashion aside from how they would best fit, and some came with labels such as ‘5s fee for supervised consumption’ and ‘not allowed for student use’ and ‘witches use at own risk’.

“Is there something I can help ya’ find?” she asked. When neither of them responded, Quora nudged Harry.

“Oh! Um, yes. Madame Pomfrey said you might have some aspirin…?”

She squinted over at him as she came around the counter. “Aspirin? Sure… unreliable stuff, that. I’ve got potions that can deal with anythin’ twice as well—”

“He asked for aspirin,” Quora said, enunciating the word as someone else might say ‘arsenic’.

“I’ve got regular headaches,” Harry explained to break the ensuing silence, feeling bad for the witch and not wanting her to make the mistake of arguing with him, which was what she looked about ready to do. “Madame Pomfrey recommended it, to avoid, um…”

“Oh,” she said, and her expression turned pitying. “Well, Poppy knows what’s best, I’m sure. Give me a second…"

She retreated through the doorway behind her counter, and Harry took the chance to risk a glare at Quora. The man didn’t seem to notice, as he was looking around the shop, wholly unimpressed. Well, it wasn’t worth annoying him this early in the morning, and since he had been poking fun and threatening Harry in the same breath ten minutes before, who could know whether his rudeness was honest or a part of his act.

“Here we are,” she said, returning with a little white plastic bottle, which looked foreign and almost cartoonish in this environment. “There’s two-hundred tablets in there; should last you a good while. Mind you, make sure you talk to Poppy or ol’ Horace before taking any potions with these. They can do funny things to the heart… Oh! An’ it will be two galleon, four sickles.”

“For that?” Quora said incredulously.

“*That* is several months worth of pain relief,” she told the man shortly. “And that’s the conversion rate, for you. It’s all the recent commotion that’s been driving it up, I hear. Now do you want it or not?”

Harry quickly dug in his robes for the coins. That was more than he’d been hoping to spend, with his limited savings… but he didn’t want to haggle with the witch, he just wanted to get out. He was lucky he’d brought enough at all.

“Thank you,” he told the witch as he set them down.

“No problem, love. An’ you know, I do owl orders up to the castle, if you need anythin’ else. If you need anythin’ else muggle, might want to be stocking up soon…”

“That will be all, thank you,” Quora said bruskly, and he grabbed Harry by the shoulder and pulled him away. Harry had just enough time to grab the pills before he was dragged out of reach of the counter and back onto the street.
Harry shook his hand off the moment they were out on the street again—or tried to, rather. “What was that all about?” he muttered as he shoved the bottle into his pocket. “Did she offend you by being friendly?”

“She just happens to be a witch who married a muggle man,” Quora replied coolly. “How do you think she got those pills? He’s a banker in Inverness, and a danger to society.”

Harry blinked up at him stupidly. He really needed to stop willfully ignoring the whole anti-muggle sentiment so that sort of contempt wouldn’t catch him off-guard, but… then again, it made him sick to his stomach to consider.

Also making him sick was the sudden wrench of apparition. For a moment, Harry panicked, thinking there was no way Quora’s grip on his shoulder was tight enough, that he’d be dropped off somewhere over Scotland—but in the next instant they had landed, appearing with a crack in the dusty room of the house they’d portkeys to before. This time, Quora did let Harry shrug him off as he staggered to grab for the table, his head spinning.

“Couldn’t you have given me a warning?” he demanded.

“You are being unusually demanding this morning, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said, ignoring his question and flicking his wand towards the next room. “I hope you understand that while we are at Malfoy Manor, this behavior will not be acceptable.”

Right. They were going to a rally. He really needed to remember who he was with… perhaps he was occluding too well. “Of course, sir,” he said lowly.

The robes they’d worn before, to warn the children at the manor, came rushing through the door towards Quora, and he caught them easily, tossing one towards Harry. “Wear that. The hood is charmed to keep your face obscured without obstructing your vision.”

“Won’t that be a little… obvious?” Harry asked, staring at the black cloth in his hands. “Um… I just mean, it’s going to be afternoon… inside…”

“You’re going to be following Lord Voldemort,” the man said, turning away to fix his hair. “Do you really think anyone is going to pay attention to you?”

Harry held back a sigh, but pulled the robe on over his head. “Is there any particular thing I’m going to be doing?” he asked. “Or just following you around?”

“Let’s see,” said Voldemort, waving his wand so the other black robe somehow wrapped into place around him, though he did not move his arms to allow for it to move into place. “What you will be doing… Well. Going where I tell you to go, standing where I tell you to stand, answering what I tell you to answer, not making a nuisance of yourself…” He paused, turning his face this way and that to regard the reflection in the window, then put his wand away and spun about, striding past Harry. “Use your common sense. And follow me, we’re leaving.”

“Right…” said Harry, following. That wasn’t much more of an idea than he’d had before.

“Oh, and—your ward. Take it off.”

That was cause for concern. “I—what?”

Voldemort paused in the door, hand on the knob, turning his head. “And don’t ask questions. It makes you appear insubordinate and incompetent, two things which I do not have tolerance for.”
“Right,” said Harry slowly, looking down at his arm. He put his hand over the ward, but regardless of his plan of following orders, this was, well, counterintuitive, to say the least. “Only… If I take it off, and especially if you’re going to be walking around with your magic all… everywhere…”

“You are trying to say you are incapable of doing so?” Voldemort’s voice was impassive. “I have seen you in Hogwarts, a place with far more ambient magic than Malfoy Manor will ever have. I have seen you in the presence of Albus Dumbledore, who leaves his magic unchecked. You seem to be in control of yourself.”

“That’s not the same!” Harry said before he could catch himself. He flinched, looking down. It had been three days, only three days, and here he was causing trouble… He knew what Voldemort was capable of. He was just asking for—He slipped his hand under his sleeve and drew the beads further down his arm, slowly unwinding them. But he hesitated, even knowing...

“Explain, then, if you’re going to be dramatic,” Voldemort said.

“It’s… your magic,” Harry said. Even if there was a charm on the hood obscuring his face, he didn’t look up. “You—you’ve been in my head when… Even if I manage to follow you around like that, I won’t be able to…”

Voldemort let go of the door knob, turning even more, and held out his hand. Harry sighed and pulled the beads off in one sharp move, handing them over. He swallowed as the ward dispersed, shifting uncomfortably as everything dulled became sharp, the spells on the robe and the dust and Voldemort’s face screaming for attention.

Time stretched, and then, what seemed a millenia later, compressed again, leaving Harry nauseous. For some reason, Voldemort did not move his hand, dangling the bead between them. “This ward you have created… It is a tool. A tool to assist you in pretending that you don’t have this gift you consider a curse. That you are normal.” Pause. “Normal, you are worthless to me. Expendable. Keep that in mind.”

Harry swallowed, and nodded, the magic in the hood rippling as his face shifted.

The ward disappeared into the folds of Voldemort’s robes. “I am not in the habit of explaining myself to people who have willingly agreed to follow orders. It is tiresome and unnecessary, as regardless of the explanation I give you will be required to do as I say.” His narrowed eyes looked down at Harry, and for a moment Harry wondered whether the spell son them weren’t somehow arranged to allow Voldemort to see through them clearly as Harry did. He could probably figure it out, with enough time—if he weren’t reeling to catch up to himself again. “The reason why you are attending this meeting despite your antisocial behavior and apparent lack of interest in the cause is because above all else, you are in my service. You will go where I tell you to go. And while in this evening’s events there will be no real danger for you to be alert to, that means only that it is a chance for you to become practiced in staying present and alert.”

“Danger,” Harry echoed slowly. “You mean for me to be an… to be an alarm system? Like at the manor?”

“It is a gift, your magemetry, if you have enough control to make use of it,” Voldemort said. “Instead, you shake in fear at the possibility. You go to extraordinary lengths to shield yourself from it, producing magic many of your peers would consider impossible to even attempt. When fear motivates you, it is acceptable.” He turned at last, opening the door. “But don’t let it rule you.”
When Voldemort had given Harry his list of tasks, Harry had thought he was just being sarcastic. It wouldn’t be out of character, as far as Harry could claim to know the man, after all. As such, when he literally spent the next several hours wandering around the Manor, staying out of the way as Voldemort wandered about casting wards and expansion spells that no single person should have been capable of, he realized exactly how serious he had been.

There were only four wizards in the manor when they arrived—Abraxas, Lucius, a man Voldemort called ‘Al’, and someone else who was off with Lucius who Harry never saw—and yet it took all of Harry’s control to keep up. Every now and then Voldemort would turn and ask him something, and Harry would do his best to answer, feeling panicked like when he got called on while not paying attention in class, though he was doing his best. Usually it was something inane, but a few times Voldemort asked him about the magical structure in a room. Those were the rare moments when Abraxas looked at him with anything more than distaste. On the other hand, Harry caught ‘Al’ eyeing him with a particularly disturbing expression of… could he call it interest? Harry did his best to ignore him, too, focusing on answering the questions without making too much of a fool of himself.

When they finally paused it was mid-afternoon and apparently time for tea, Voldemort disappearing into Abraxas’s study with the other two men and leaving Harry in a nearby sitting room. A house elf popped in with a plate stacked with a variety of little sandwiches, but Harry, who had been directed to sit on a silk-upholstered sofa that looked to be embroidered with gold thread, couldn’t bring himself to eat more than one. Instead he let his head fall back against the wall, and closed his eyes, tracing the magic running through the walls and in the furniture and doors and windows and the study with all its wards, and the library, the library…

When Voldemort returned Harry nearly jumped to his feet. He seemed to have left the others behind. “Come, Mr. Harrigan,” Voldemort said, not pausing a moment as he strode off down the hall.

Harry quickly fell into step, trying to get a read on the man, on where they were going with such haste. When they had been walking around earlier, it had been at Abraxas’s pace, but now Voldemort put his long legs to their full use, such that Harry was nearly at a jog trying to keep up with him. He wanted to ask where they were going with such haste, but he didn’t dare, after all of Voldemort’s warnings.

A few minutes and several winding turns later, they arrived in the room with the floo in it. Voldemort did not even pause as he drew his wand and waved a spell towards the fireplace, Harry flinching as a fire burst to life, flickering red, blue, purple, green, before finally turning to a perfectly ordinary fire. Less visible was the way the wards shifted, creating a bubble around the space, and the way a chain of magic stretched up through the chimney, connecting, no doubt, to the floo network—which Harry was certain would mess him up if he let it.

“Your arm, Mr Harrigan,” Voldemort said after a moment, and Harry looked down in confusion before he realized what was meant. Apparently the delay was too long, as Voldemort reached back and flicked his hand towards Harry, sending a coil of magic that wrapped around Harry’s arm and pulled it into his grip. Harry winced, and not only because of the raw magic—he knew what was coming. Voldemort didn’t hesitate to push back Harry’s sleeve and press a long finger into the Dark Mark on his arm. It was all Harry could do to hold back the hiss of pain as it burnt.

The pain was the least of his concerns a moment later, as the floo flared to life, but when Voldemort dropped his arm, leaving Harry to shake the sleeve back down, it was probably for the best he had a
charmed hood to cover his scowl. Why, exactly, had he needed to use Harry's mark to send the call, when he had demonstrated that he could do it just as well on his own? Power plays, no doubt—and, as Voldemort had said earlier, who had the guts to try and tell Voldemort what to do? Certainly not Harry, at least when he was managing some level of self control... maybe Abraxas, but he wasn't here, and he had an arm and a leg in the grave, anyways.

Harry tried not to react to the questioning looks he got as figure after figure emerged from the floo. Four in total: two white wizards, one black, and a witch with blond hair twisted into so tight a knot that it seemed to be pulling her face back with it. They were all older—Quora's age, at least—and dressed in formal black robes. And they were all tied to Voldemort by the Dark Mark.


Silence, for a moment, and then one spoke—and to Harry's shock, he found he recognized the voice: it was Lord Wilkes, the man whose face Voldemort had worn to Azkaban. "None, my Lord. It is all as planned. The ministry won't be interfering."

"Excellent," said Voldemort. "Do try and extract Abraxas from his study before the necessary moment, would you, Theophilus? And let us all take care with the initiates. I've been warned that they are an... enthusiastic lot."

For some reason, that made the severe group chuckle, and Voldemort flicked his wand to the floo again, the connection shifting somehow. It wasn't a minute later before the next guest came through—and after that, it was a steady stream, more and more until Harry's head swam, filling the extended manor. So many he could hardly breath.

Harry had been right, earlier, in worrying that it would be all he could do to follow Voldemort without losing his mind. He thought he might have been able to work it out, if he had only had a few minutes away from the crowds, to observe from a distance, but he had no way to communicate that desire with Voldemort, and he wasn't foolhardy enough to try. Besides, Voldemort had told him that his job was nothing more than following him around. And there were brief moments of clarity—when Voldemort stopped in front of Avery and Mulciber, for example, their familiar magics broke through, through as Voldemort had said: no one cared to pay attention to the Dark Lord’s shadow.

And slowly, as he tripped over the hem of his robe and nearly walked into Voldemort’s back and accepted a drink of some sort without thinking and then struggled to banish it from under the robe without attracting too much attention, the lucid moments begin to grow longer. He began to catch snatches of Voldemort’s conversations—and the Dark Lord was, at least this afternoon, quite the socialite, talking with more people than Harry could remember even meeting in his lifetime, and pointedly ignoring some, too.

But what really managed break through the haze was a horrible, shrieking laugh.

Harry blinked, forcing his eyes to refocus, and found an unfortunately familiar figure not only conversing with Voldemort, but daring to touch him, laying her hand on his arm as though it belonged there. Walburga Black, in all her horror. Harry would never pity Voldemort, but he certainly did not envy him, either, or Orion, her husband, who had on what was apparently his only expression: blank boredom.

“And I told her of course her son would still count as a Black—even if he is a Malfoy first—assuming he amounts to something first. Merlin knows we need more men of value in the family.”

“Ahh, yes, such a waste,” Voldemort agreed. “Sirius might have made a valuable asset. I have heard that he received several of the Black gifts, though following that fool Dumbledore he’ll never reach
“He always was such a troublesome child,” Walburga sighed. “I had thought it was just a bit of rebellion, which is always a good, healthy sign in a Black, but then he had to go and get himself thrown into Gryffindor, and there’s nothing that can stop the likes of Dumbledore sinking their nasty mudblood claws into him there.”

“The Headmaster is a menace. Has been for the last forty years.”

“He has, hasn’t he? And now Sirius has gone and made himself useless. And of course since Sirius left, Regulus has been an absolute horror to deal with,” she said with a overly emphatic sigh. “That boy… well, he takes after his father, you know, who could make sense of that.”

Orion, standing a few feet behind her, gave his wife a sideways look. Had he not been a Lord and the dignified sort, Harry would have sworn that he was rolling his eyes as he returned them to the crowd.

“Such a needy boy, as well,” she went on. “If I hadn’t given birth to him myself, I’d swear that he was a Rosier, rather than a Black. He is nearly of age, but still acts no more than an eleven year old nervous before his first year at school, with how he clings. Honestly.”

Walburga flipped her bolsteous curls off of one shoulder, revealing more of the fleshy expanse between her chin and her robes. Harry followed Orion’s lead in looking away, and wished he could tune her words out entirely. It was impossible, however; her voice was terribly shrill. Harry bet most everyone in the foyer could hear her words as clearly as Harry could. He hoped Regulus wasn’t in the room—he’d felt his magic earlier, but lost it in the crowd, and wasn’t going to try and seek it out.

“He must hold family above all else, being a Black,” Voldemort reasoned.

“Well, of course. But holding family above all else is hardly the same as needing approval before he shits.”

Harry knew that at least one of the ladies standing nearby was listening in, as she spat back the wine she was drinking the moment she’d processed what Walburga had said. Harry shifted uncomfortably. How could she say that, about her own son?

“I have heard that he is talented, though,” Voldemort prompted, gliding easily past her words.

“Talented? Of course. The boy’s been outdoing his tutors in spell theory since his second year. And the Dark Arts… well, he is a Black in capability.” She did not sound particularly impressed by this. “Perhaps under your guidance he might even take initiative to use them as he is able.” She let out a tragic sigh. “He does so strive to promote the cause, after all, but he is gentle, and naive, and I’m afraid he won’t be much use to anyone until he finds his taste for blood, or has it beat into him…”

Unable to listen to her any longer, Harry took a step forward, needing to say something in Regulus’s defense—but he stopped short. There was no audible or visible sign, but the moment Harry had moved, Voldemort’s magic had shifted, so slightly that if Harry were not agitated and made hypersensitive by the crowd he might not have noticed. He swallowed, knowing it would be obscured by the robe, and slowly shifted the foot back, the conversation going on unchanged.

Was it—it was meant for him, wasn’t it? Anyone else, and Harry would have thought they were simply incapable of containing themselves at that—that witch’s haranguing, but… Voldemort didn’t lose control. If he cared one way or another about the words she was spewing, it was buried so deeply it would never see the light of day.
“I am sure Regulus will shape into a fine man,” Voldemort said smoothly. “He has his mother’s influence, after all.”

“Yes, well, perhaps Sirius will come to his senses, if we’d like to be wishful,” Walburga went on, oblivious. “Regardless of his delusions, he is a Black. Once he leaves Hogwarts and sees the world…”

Before the conversation could go on, thank Merlin, there was the sound of a bell chiming, and the great doors to the ballroom opened. “Ah, you must forgive us, Walburga,” Voldemort said, smoothly cutting her off mid-sentence. “As delightful as ever though it is to speak to you, there is business to attend to, I am afraid, and supper awaiting yourself. Lord Malfoy has gone all out.”

“You don’t need pretty words to be free of her,” Orion Black said, the most words he had contributed to the conversation yet. “Come, Walburga; leave the man in peace. I saw Theodosia Nott going into the hall, if you need someone to harass. Merlin knows her time is more expendable.”

“You wound me,” Walburga sniffed, but she let herself be pulled away.

Voldemort turned and strode towards one of the side doors before anyone else could set upon him, not that anyone else could possibly be as forward as Walburga was. Harry followed as quickly as he was able without outright running. No, he had been wrong; no matter what Voldemort had claimed, through the charmed hood he had seen the stares, whether because of the hood or because Harry was at least a foot shorter and always having to race after Lord Voldemort. Some shadow he was, barely able to keep up.

Abraxas Malfoy was waiting in the room they ended up in, wearing a robe not unlike Harry’s, the hood askew on one shoulder. He had magic coursing through his blood, like he had just drunk a pepperup potion, but he looked exhausted. “There you are,” he grumbled as Harry closed the door behind Voldemort. “We were scheduled to let them in three minutes ago.”

“They can wait. Walburga, of course, had plenty to say. Some of it was even interesting.”

Abraxas produced a snort, derisive or disbelieving. “And of course, as everyone will wait for their lord without complaint, you will wait for Walburga to stop talking. I’m surprised you’ve managed to escape.”

“Go put your scheming in motion, old man,” Voldemort said. “I will be there when I’m there. That is the benefit of being the charming one.”

Abraxas huffed, but he flipped up the hood of his robe and stalked out of the room. Harry shifted from foot to foot, wondering what was coming next but not daring enough to ask. Before the silence could stretch too thin, Voldemort turned around, eyeing Harry. Gone was any of the amusement he reserved for Abraxas, as was the ‘charm’ he’d treated Walburga to. He looked down at Harry with narrowed eyes, face impassive—and gave a flick of his wrist charged with magic. Harry flinched, but it hit the hood, not him, leaving Harry blinking as the spells keeping it up over his face disengaged.

“Did Walburga offend your delicate sensibilities, Mr. Harrigan?” he asked coolly. A rhetorical question, Harry thought, but when he didn’t answer—“Well?”

There was no right answer, here. “I… what she was saying about Regulus was…”

“Was no reason for you to step out of line.” Quora stared at Harry, unblinking. “You are not here to react to anything anyone says, regardless of who or what it is. I don’t care if someone shows up and
declares they are going to murder Mr. Smithe or Ms. Moone or Regulus Black. While you are shadowing me, it is none of your concern. Do you understand?"

Harry bit the side of his cheek. He wasn’t going to argue. If that happened, he could act then, but for now, he needed to say what Voldemort wanted if he wanted to avoid being crucio ed. "Yes," said Harry.

"Yes, my lord," Voldemort corrected.

Harry bit down hard on his tongue before he could say it, but no doubt the thought was clear in his eyes: *I'm not your lord any more than you're mine.*

Voldemort sighed and took out his wand. “I see that you require assistance in learning obedience,” he said, brandishing it in a swoop.

“No, I—” Harry started, taking a step back in alarm, but the spell hit him before he could go any farther. And even though he had been following Voldemort for hours now without the ward, and even though he had a piece of his magic embedded into his arm, the force of the spell ran through him like a bolt of lightning, like his a brain was a machine that could simply short-circuit.

When he managed to focus again, he found himself stepping forward, back to where he had been. The damn spell again—Harry’s hands were shaking as he felt it, the magic directly manipulating his legs. But it wasn’t just in his legs this time, it was running up his spine, keeping his posture rigidly straight, and in his jaw, sealing his mouth as though it had been wired shut.

This wasn’t the Imperius; this wasn’t something he knew how to fight, and sheer force of will didn’t seem to have anything to do with it. This was something like turning Harry’s body into a puppet, the lines made up of thick cables of magic running back to Voldemort. Another tie to the man, and this one was expending energy to maintain, unlike the Dark Mark. The man seemed entirely unbothered by the loss—Merlin, how much magic could one man have? And the amount of focus, and extremely detailed understanding of human anatomy that such a spell must require, to use it as Voldemort did…

Harry did have enough control to swallow. What had he gotten himself into?

“Better,” said Voldemort, twitching his wand so that Harry felt his head tilt back. He looked somewhere around the man’s chin, which was apparently close enough. “Your role in the next evening will be to stand next to the door which we enter through, remaining there for the duration. Unlike out there—” He waved vaguely in the direction they had just come from. “—this is a meeting for Death Eaters alone, and I do expect you to pay attention to it. Not to contribute, of course, but it is rare enough that we have this sort of large-scale gathering that I expect your complete focus.”

*Then give me back my ward and get your magic out of my body,* Harry thought fiercely, but Voldemort gave one final flick of his wand, Harry’s hood slid back up over his head, and then his legs were carrying him in front of the man, down through a short corridor and into a large, dimly lit room.

As his feet planted themselves to the right of the door, so close to the wall he could feel his shoulders grazing it as he breathed he couldn’t control, he surveyed the room, the direction of his gaze seemingly the one power he had maintained. It wasn’t as big as the ball room, of course, and might have been considered a sun room in the day. It had tall ceilings, like many of the rooms Harry had seen here, and the curved wall on the other side of the door they had come through was filled with thirteen floor-to-ceiling windows. If they had stood straight, they wouldn’t have been out of place in a cathedral, line with thick black iron and arched to points at the top, but instead they were curved so
that the points joined together, creating a half-dome of glass.

The other three walls were lined with other black-robed figures, and he could feel from each and every one of them the ties of the Dark Mark. There were at least twenty, but it was difficult to count, because outside of the room there were several more people, and beyond that, the party, and, of course Voldemort, as distracting and terrifying as ever, worse now that he had Harry dangling on strings—

The Dark Lord strode forward, seating himself in the only chair in the room, one wrought out of black iron that matched the windows and couldn’t have been comfortable, though he lounged in it as though it were. He looked around them with a satisfied glint in his eye, a controlled neutral expression on his face as he examined them, like there was something more to see than a series of black-robed figures. He paused, fixing his eyes on one in particular.

“Any progress, Augustus?”

The Death Eater in question stepped forward with a bow, remaining bent as he spoke. “As ever my Lord’s patience is generous,” he said. “I may push harder, but I fear…”

“You mind in more valuable,” Voldemort said dismissively, turning his gaze onwards. The Death Eater bowed deeper before stepping back to his previous place against the wall. “And you, Travers,” Voldemort asked, and his voice was cold. His face was the same impassive mask, his magic still nearly impossible to comprehend let alone to try to get some deeper read from, but with the slightest shift in tone every Death Eater in the room was alert and on edge. “Your progress has been inordinately slow. One might think you were… distracted.”

The Death Eater directly across the room from Harry fell to his knees. “Please, my lord…. She is stubborn… I simply need more time…”

“Time?” Voldemort let out a single, dispassionate laugh. “You asked for more time last month, and the month before…. But the Wizengamot is not waiting for you—are you working around her schedule? This is no time for you to learn manners, Travers…”

“Let me deal with her, my lord,” another Death Eater called, her voice eager as she stepped forward with unmatched boldness. “I’ll show her a taste of what a real witch is capable of.”

“You would enjoy that, wouldn’t you.” The corners of Voldemort’s mouth curled up into something of a grimace. “Have we tied your leash to short? A shame. Patience, Bella, patience… When the time is right you will get your share of the blood…”

“My lord knows best,” she said, bowing low.

“But perhaps your suggestion does have merit. Show us what you had in mind.”

And he waved an arm to where Travers was still kneeling.

This… Bella, had Voldemort not been in the room Harry thought her magic would have his mind dancing in circles trying to keep track of it. She moved, drawing her wand, like a cat on the prowl, the Death Eaters behind her leaning in with interest and those unfortunate enough to stand near Travers shrinking back. But when she waved her arm and cast the cruciatus, the whole of her magic, not just the angry beam she channelled through her wand, leapt on Travers with a fury and…

Merlin.

Everywhere the Dark Lord was control, she was chaos. Had her magic been something tangible, it
would be like Travers had fallen into a sandstorm, and he’d have been stripped down to the bone in seconds. As it was—well, it was difficult to tell. It was like staring into the sun, because her magic was indiscriminate as it lashed around Travers, and if Harry was right and magemetry was his magic reaching out—

Well, that had to be right, because it was the only explanation for why he couldn’t tear himself away, why the curse on someone else was sending pins and needles up his arms. Even with Voldemort sitting right there, he couldn’t—

And then it was over. Hours or minutes or seconds later, and Harry realized the spell had stopped, though Bella’s magic was still curling threateningly around Travers’s, as if waiting for another chance to strike, gripping him tightly in a choke hold—but it was enough for him to focus on breathing normally—

He must have missed something, because he blinked and both Bella and Travers had retreated to their previous positions, lining the walls, and the doors that Voldemort sat facing opened, and a new group of black-robed figures entered. Harry’s head was still spinning from Bella’s curse, and he felt like he was watching the crowd at a great distance, rather than halfway across a room. They were, at least, mostly in control of their magic, and their entrance put them between Harry and Bella, distracting him from the feeling like she still had her claws into him. He took a slow breath as they shuffled into rows, and though he could not shut his eyes for longer than a blink—Voldemort’s damn spell, no doubt—he could control his eyes enough to up through the darkened windows.

He could do this. He’d been fine out in the foyer, mostly—he wasn’t about to risk diving himself into Voldemort’s magic, but it was there whether he looked for it or not, and he could ground himself with it, if need be. He let his mind stretch out, sliding over the new group—the initiates—

Wait. Was that—

No.

No.

He could feel them. They were still shuffled into place—into rows—so he couldn’t quite pick out which of the black robed figures they were, but it was unmistakable.

No, it was a mistake. Bella had scrambled him even worse, and he’d just been think how difficult it was for him to even count, between the marks and the manor and the party and Voldemort—

Who stood, and began to speak, greeting the gathered as potential initiates into the fold, joining the Death Eater’s dark purpose, et cetera, et cetera—but Harry didn’t listen; he was too busy straining against the spell, trying to regain enough control of himself, unable to shake his fright. It wasn’t working—of course it wouldn’t; he didn’t even know how this spell worked, but it wasn’t something he could throw off like he could the Imperius—damn it! That bastard had been planning for this, hadn’t he—

After a few minutes, his mind slowed down enough to try and focus again. It had to be a mistake. They’d spent more time together—sharing the table in the library, working together in potions, trying to get a grip on occlumency—than Harry had with anyone else, and…

There was no way around it. That was Severus. In this room. In that crowd.

And there, next to him, was Regulus.

Which ones—no, more important—
What were they doing here? Why had Voldemort—why hadn’t Abraxas—Harry had been sure that the contract had said he could neither mark nor make use of them in any other way, not until they were out of Hogwarts. And—and Regulus wasn’t even seventeen! What use was—

Walburga. And Orion. Neither of them had Dark Marks, but they were here, and at the last meeting, and they—or at least Walburga—wanted Regulus in Voldemort’s service. And even if Voldemort couldn’t use Regulus while he was underage, if he wanted something from Lord and Lady Black—

But that didn’t matter, because Voldemort was bound in a contract, and he couldn’t Mark or use them—

So what were they doing here?

And then he felt Voldemort’s magic shift, and turned his eyes sharply back to the Dark Lord. It wasn’t a spell, it was… preparation. Harry had missed the majority of the speech, too focused on—maybe there had been answers… damn it!

“Of course, there is only one test of worth,” Voldemort murmured.

The room was completely silent as he looked over them, his voice soft but still seeming to echo around the room. Then he waved a hand almost lazily towards Harry, and the spell tightened around his legs, marching him forward, and his hands were moving too, drawing back the sleeve from his left arm, and in dizzying seconds he stood beside Voldemort’s chair, arm on display so that everyone in the room could see the Dark Mark, black and angry against his skin. He could hear some of the unmarked draw in sharp breaths, whether in awe or fear, but Harry ignored them, shaking as he searched the crowd, trying to determine which of the black-robed figures were Severus and Regulus—

Maybe they weren’t there. Maybe Harry was imagining things—maybe—

“The Dark Mark,” Voldemort said, not so much as glancing Harry’s way as he gestured towards it. “You have heard, of course, that your oath may prove fatal if your magic rejects it, if you are not devoted to being bound. This is your first test of loyalty. If you are finding that you have doubts, I suggest you spend the next few minutes resolving them. Now that you have come here, you leave a Death Eater, or not at all.” He paused. “Though if you prefer a more entertaining death, please, speak up. Bella still wants to play.”

A chuckle passed around the marked Death Eaters ringing the room, though even Voldemort’s spell could not stop the shudder of revulsion at the thought of witnessing more of Bella’s ‘fun’. Another gesture from Voldemort and his legs propelled him back to the corner by the door, sleeve falling over the Mark as his arm dropped to his side. Severus and Regulus—was it worse to see them Marked, or tortured? It had been in part to spare them torture that he—it didn’t matter. Voldemort couldn’t mark them. He’d signed a contract on his magic not to mark them. He—he wouldn’t dare. He wouldn’t risk his magic. He was the Dark Lord. Without magic he was…

Voldemort gave no sign of being concerned, nor did he make any move to dismiss them or any others as he cast a ward around his chair, and Abraxas beckoned the first of the newcomers through. An unfamiliar adult, magic firmly controlled. When they stepped through the ward, Harry could see Voldemort’s mouth moving, but could not hear the words they were saying—a silencing spell of some sort. The newcomer bent a knee, and spoke with Voldemort for a few minutes.

The silence in the room was broken only by the rustling of robes. Even as he directed his attention to one, the whole group was watching Voldemort.
Then the kneeling figure pulled back their sleeve, and the whole room seemed to take a collective breath, leaning in closer. Harry could feel Bella’s magic rippling in excitement, and others, too, though not so dramatically. Voldemort grabbed the presented wrist tightly, and then—

It was like watching someone cut off a finger, to Harry. He watched, captive, and felt, disturbed, as Voldemort’s spell surgically inserted a shard of his magic directly into the offered arm. A phantom ache in his own mark—or was it real, the pain of forging of a new bond? The initiate was probably screaming, by how frantically they were struggling against Voldemort’s grip, but he did not let go, even as the air around where the tip of his wand was pressed against skin rippled with inky darkness, and his magic spun itself like a rope, tethering this new Death Eater’s magic to his own. A noose. A collar, with the leash to pull back. It didn’t matter that it was focused around the arm—with magic, every extension was a neck vulnerable to attack.

When the spell ended, the Death Eater sagged. In the dim light, Harry thought he saw Voldemort smile, but then he spoke, and let go of the arm, and the Death Eater struggled to his feet, and bowed low before retreating.

There was no applause, though when they came out through the ward, a tensions was lifted. A collective breath of relief. Some shuffling. The next initiate was beckoned forward, the newly marked beckoned to the back of the crowd.

Severus was fourth in the line.

He walked towards the front without a fault in his step, sank easily to his knees, robes pooling around him—and Harry tried to shout, tried to break free so he could throw himself between the Slytherin and the worst decision of his life—he pushed with his magic, wishing that for once his shoddy control would come to his aid—

Severus didn’t struggle. His arm grew tense and taut, but he did not try to pull away from Voldemort’s grip.

Harry, meanwhile, was fighting as hard as he could. He’s breaking the contract! Harry would have screamed, had he only been able to move. His magic is—

But his magic wasn’t bound. In fact, it seemed to flow easier, as the Mark settled quickly into Severus’s skin. Perhaps he was holding back, on account of it being… But no, Voldemort did not care about Severus’s age, clearly.

When he was done, Voldemort spoke again. He looked… amused. Like he hadn’t just torn off a piece of himself and shoved it into someone’s arm. Like he hadn’t just broken a magical contract, and Marked someone of Hogwarts age while Harry was even in the room. Harry wanted to cry, watching as Severus bowed his head, and then Voldemort let go, and when Severus stood Harry could see him sway. He could feel the way Severus’s magic, so tightly bound in the space of his body, was rippling around the Mark, as though it was trying to clear the foreign invasion, but Severus merely stepped back out through the ward before turning and walking stiffly back towards the crowd, and on his way—

Regulus was beckoned forward.

No. God—please—

Not Regulus. He wasn’t even seventeen. There was no excuse, no way this could benefit Voldemort enough to make even casting the spell worth it—
Regulus passed through the ward without hesitation, and sank into the appropriate kneel smoothly, as though he had performed the action a thousand times before. And Voldemort did not simply speak as he had with the others, he reached out and through the enchantments on the robe’s hood, grabbing Regulus’s chin and tilting his head back slightly—

It was that which really sent Harry’s mind reeling. The connection—

He fought, he did; no matter how impossible his goal he had to at least try. That was why he was here, wasn’t it? He couldn’t just watch as Voldemort laughed, as he took his arm, split open Regulus’s arm and traced blood on the skin— The harder he tried to fight it, the harder it became to breath, but he didn’t stop, he couldn’t, not when Regulus—

And when the spell ended, and Harry could feel the magic tying them together, now, as bearers of the Dark Mark, and tying Regulus to Voldemort, well. The spell, the awful spell Voldemort had woven into his body, was the only thing keeping him upright. The fight hadn’t gone out of him, it just felt—hopeless. Worthless.

All this was for nothing. Everything Harry had done to find a way to keep them safe…

Voldemort marked on.

There were twelve initiates in total, but Harry did his best not to pay as much attention to them. Of course, there was no escaping Voldemort’s magic, especially as he was implanting shards of it in the arms of everyone in the room. But he focused on that—it was easier than wondering who the other ten here were. Kids, like Regulus? They weren’t Hogwarts students, or at least not ones he recognized, but the incident with the manor had proved there were more magical kids out there than ever came to Hogwarts…

And if they were not kids, then they were adults. People who were at least legally capable of making their own decisions, and they were choosing this knowing what they were getting into. Harry didn’t—no, he couldn’t be angry for their sakes. He didn’t have the energy for it, not when Severus and Regulus had—

And they had. Maybe they weren’t as much to blame as Voldemort, especially not Regulus—but they had willingly taken the Mark. He’d done as much as he could, hadn’t he? But if they weren’t willing, the Mark wouldn’t have taken.

Maybe he hadn’t done enough. He should have known how to break the spell. He should have—

The last of the new Death Eaters stumbled back from Voldemort’s seat, and the Dark Lord swept his wand through the air. To the others, it would look simply like he was dismantling the ward, but to Harry… Harry could feel the way a new bit of magic wrapped itself around the twelve new bonds, tying them together. Like tying of a limb before an amputation, apparently, as with the sweep backwards the tether to the Dark Lord was severed.

No, not severed. It was still there. Just… disconnected. Like the bonds were a radio, tuned but without a signal.

It made Harry’s heart flutter with discomfort either way. That wasn’t what magic was supposed to feel like.

“Your sponsors will continue to be your point of contact, for now,” Voldemort said smoothly, addressing the group. Had he not been able to see how little of a dent the marking had made in his magic, Harry would have thought Voldemort was tired. “And will provide you instruction for the
evening. After supper, of course. The two I instructed before, remain. The rest…”

He waved his hand vaguely. Abraxas stepped forward, clearing his throat. He, too, was wearing a hood, but Harry could feel his flagging magic, and the Pepper-Up potion that was probably keeping him upright still coursing through his veins. “Follow me,” he ordered, and led the group back out through the tall doors, and the Death Eaters around the edges of the room followed, many bowing to their lord as they left.

And after a minute, the door shut, and the room was empty, except for Voldemort, Severus, Regulus, and Harry.

At least Voldemort did not seem inclined to make them wait long. He was fond of doing that, at least to Harry, but the echoes of the door were not completely gone before he spoke.

“You did well,” Voldemort said, leaning back somewhat in his chair. “You are young—too young, I am afraid, to be of much use at this stage, and yet you both received the Mark with more grace than wizards twice your age. I commend you.”

There was a silence, and then Regulus spoke: “Thank you, my lord.”

“Your mother will be pleased, Mr. Black.”

Voldemort’s voice was almost gentle. It made Harry sick—what the hell was he playing at? There was little Harry could do… But maybe that was all that this was. A ploy to piss off Harry. If it was, well, he had succeeded, though what he hoped to gain…

“Oh, and…” He cut off, looking over his shoulder. “I almost forgot.”

At with that, he flicked his wand lazily towards Harry, who felt his legs snap to action and march him out of the corner he’d been positioned in. He marched forward, turning sharply to face Voldemort from directly before his seat, between him and the other two, and then—

“I hope we have resolved the issue of your self-control, Mr. Harrigan?”

The spell broke.

Behind him, he heard Regulus’s breath catch, and felt Severus’s magic grow suddenly still, but he ignored them. “You bastard!” he shouted. “You said you wouldn’t—you lying—”

“Lying?” Voldemort asked, tilting his head an awful, almost… gleeful way. “I have followed the stipulations entirely as they were laid out. I have done and done not, exactly as I said I would. It is you who failed to pay careful enough to what you signed on to, Mr. Harrigan, if I have done something you did not expect. These two have volunteered themselves to our Dark purpose. Just like you, Mr. Harrigan.”

Volunteered. Volunteered.

For fuck’s—

“You knew what I meant! You broke the—”

Voldemort swept his wand lazily through the air, and Harry might have dodged if it wouldn’t have left Regulus in the path of the spell. There was no red or yellow light to accompany it, at least, but Harry’s voice was cut off mid-word, and when he tried to speak again the only sound that came up was something like an old door struggling open.
“As you can see, Mr. Harrigan, my magic is quite intact.” He tapped his wand against his hand. “As entertaining as your indignation is, it is a rather poor idea to suggest your Lord has no honor, no?”

You’re not my lord! Harry wanted to shout, but he could still feel the mark there on his arm, that tether of magic still cutting out through the ward. If Voldemort had broken the contract, the mark would be gone, or at least the magic in it.

Of course Voldemort would have no problem doing this—after all his bullshit about making a bargain so that Harry would serve him willingly—

“I am disappointed that the lesson seems not to have set in, Mr. Harrigan,” Voldemort went on after a moment. He’d probably read every thought in Harry’s mind—Harry didn’t care—“I would hate to have to take more drastic measures, don’t you agree?”

Harry, having no other way to respond, rolled his eyes.

Voldemort smiled.

“Mr. Snape, Mr. Black, I think it is time for the two of you to return to Hogsmeade. Unfortunately for everyone, I am sure, you are still Hogwarts students, and while I am sure that will prove useful down the line, for tonight it is simply your job to remain in the school, securing your new status as a secret. Your initiation activities will have to come later, when you are out from under Dumbledore’s thumb. Oh, and be sure to attend supper in the Great Hall tonight.” He paused. “You do know the way out on your own, don’t you? There’s a floo out that door. And take Mr. Harrigan with you. He seems to be at the end of his very short rope.” He flicked his wand at Harry again, but the spell didn’t release—instead the black robe was banished, leaving him in his school things.

“Oh, and…” Voldemort finally stood up, slipping his hand into his robes as he did so. He came forward, stepping down and closer, closer, until he was right in front of Harry. Harry stared up at him in defiance, not stepping back, even as Voldemort’s hand came up right in front of his face, holding—

The null ward.

“Your choice, Mr. Harrigan,” he said. “Only, next time I tell you to take it off, I won’t be so forgiving of your delays.”

He clenched his jaw, but, even through the spell, he knew now by Travers’ example how Voldemort treated Death Eaters who dawdled. Bella’s curse, second-hand, had been frightening, but he knew first hand what Voldemort could do. Would Harry warrant personal treatment? Well… he had so far. And it wasn’t as though Voldemort was in want of opportunity…

Harry snatched the ward and wrapped it around his wrist nonetheless, and nearly sighed for the relief of it. The last traces of Bella falling away, though Voldemort’s new spell continued, curling tight around his throat, and the Dark Mark’s tether remained unyielding. Voldemort seemed to have cut himself off from the new initiates, but with Harry, it was a noose.

Regulus—and Harry could still tell it is Regulus, following with the mark on his arm sunk in deep beneath the skin—seemed to look at Harry hesitantly, but Harry turned and stormed right past him and Severus, toward the door Voldemort had indicated, ignoring how behind him he could still feel Voldemort, turning to follow the rest of his Death Eaters off in the direction of the main party. The pair caught up to him fairly quickly, but it wasn’t until Harry reached the fireplace in the next room and grabbed a handful of floo powder off the bowl on the mantle that he realized he was stuck without a voice, and didn’t know where he would have gone, anyways.
"Should we just leave the robes here?" Regulus was asking Severus, when he turned around. "The elves will find them, I suppose."

"It's as good a place as any," Severus agreed, and pulled his robe off over his head. When his head came clear, Harry found himself being stared at, a certain gleam in Severus's wide black eyes. Harry scowled back. He wanted to knock the smirk off Severus's face—didn't he realize what he had just done?

But Regulus was quicker. "Come on," he said, coming forward and taking Harry by the elbow. He, at least, seemed hesitant, though he took the floo powder from Harry's hand and cast it down with confidence, calling out something as he pulled Harry forward into the fire.

Flooing with another person, Harry discovered, was terribly uncomfortable, as they seemed to twine together in transit, the spell on his throat snapping as they went, and when they shot out the fireplace on the other ended they both ended up toppling on the floor. Harry groaned, and, not wanting to look at Regulus, jumped up as quickly as he could, looking around, and spotted out the window—Hogsmeade. It must be the same house they'd gone through to get to the Halloween rally. As quickly as he could, Harry made his way out the door and down the stairs, ignoring Regulus's calls and the flare of the floo behind him and the confused look of the witch on the landing as he stormed by, throwing open the door and storming out onto the street—

He needed—he couldn't—

He felt like he was going to burst, with all the anger welled up inside of him. He couldn't risk staying in that house, not when it had the connection to Malfoy Manor, to Voldemort, for fear that now that the spell was broken he would go back, to try and enact some revenge that was sure to turn out doing him no good—

"Harry, wait for a moment, please," he heard Regulus behind him, which prompted him to start moving again. He couldn't be around Regulus, not when—they'd made their choice; Voldemort had made that much clear. This was why he should have never let himself get attached—he was supposed to be finding his way home, not mucking around trying to re-shape the past—

"I knew it," he heard Severus saying—crowling, more like— "I knew—for Merlin's sake, Harry, are you really that—"

He grabbed Harry's shoulder, and the direct contact of their magic and the proximity of another Mark made Harry flinch, spinning away, and as he turned, he saw the triumphant look in Severus's eye, and all of it—his anger at Voldemort, his frustration with them, with himself—came crashing together and—

Before he quite realized what he was doing, he'd punched Severus across the face.

"Leave me the fuck alone, Snape," he snarled, standing over where Severus had toppled to the ground and was touching his cheek in horrified surprise. "You have no idea what you—what I—"

He caught sight of Regulus, a few paces back, his face frozen with his mouth hanging open, eyes wide and alarmed. Regulus, looking like a child, because he wasn't even sixteen yet, and now he had gone and sold his life away—

He took a step back, turned around, and ran.
He ran where he always ran: the Room of Requirements, where when the door disappeared into the brickwork behind him he let out a scream. Had anyone been around to hear it, they might have thought he’d been set upon by a banshee, but it was just Harry and the room, and his voice seemed to echo in the little brass bowl. But the anger didn’t fade, even as Harry grabbed out his wand, and, turning away from the altar, slashed it through the air, willing the magic out of him—let it out, let him be—

And with a crack, a gash, long and black, appeared in the wall.

Harry stood, panting, and stared at it for a moment. It looked, he imagined, like the stones had been split by hot iron. After a moment, he let his other hand come up, and brushed the edge of the crevice. It was not hot, like he expected, but the edge was sharp—he flinched and blood welled on the tip of his finger.

It took a moment, trying to blot the bleeding, for him to realize what he’d done, and now, now he regretted it. The castle was not a punching bag, and with all the magic that flowed through the walls the building was practically an animate thing. Slowly he lifted his wand again; though it seemed almost offensive to use magic again, when he had done something like that, he had to try—"Reparo Maximus."

He must still not be in control; that was the only explanation for how not only the stones he had broken but the whole of the wall had recovered, regaining edges like they had just been chiselled from a mountain and set in place. Despite that, the damage was not completely gone. The gaping crack had closed, sure, but left behind a thin scar like a black vein.

Harry swallowed, and stepped back.

What was he doing? He’d punched Severus, and now this—this was—

Not enough. Because it was the right—it was Voldemort he wanted to fight against, but now he couldn’t—now he’d gone and—

Now he’d gone and fucked it all up.

God, what was Harry doing? This was what happened when he tried to act on his own. But he didn’t have anyone to talk to: not Severus who had—who had… Not Dumbledore, who was such a major player in the future… Not anyone else, because if he explained his situation to anyone else his chances of returning where he belonged were only going to get worse—

He jumped back and into the scarred wall as the air around him shifted, a crack bringing a foreign body into the room—

Hani. She looked at him, wide eyed, apparently as confused as he was. “Master Harry?” she asked, glancing around the room.

“He replied, all too aware, suddenly, of how little protection his robes provided, as if they were so threadbare she might see through to his arm... “What are you...?”

“Hogwarts is calling Hani here,” she said. “To the Come-and-Go Room.”

Harry frowned. The castle itself? Well, it was the Room of Requirements… it was designed to respond to any need. He had needed someone to talk to, someone who knew… Harry sighed. He didn’t want to lay more at Hani’s feet. “That was my fault,” he said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—
you probably have things to be getting to.”

“Hogwarts as assigned Hani to be here,” she replied, taking a few steps forward towards the shrine. “What… what is here?”

Harry let himself sink down the wall, glancing over his right shoulder at the odd collection on the altar. “I’m not entirely sure,” he heard himself say. “It’s—it’s where I come to be alone. Where I fell asleep that night, when you couldn’t find me.”

“Master Harry is wanting to be alone?”

Harry sighed again, and shook his head. “No, I just… I can’t talk to anyone about this. It’s… complicated. Involves the… time travel and… everything.”

“Hani isn’t giving up Master Harry’s secrets to anyone.”

“No,” he agreed, and then he stared at her for a long moment before letting his eyes close, leaning his head back and resting it against the stone. “I want to go home,” he confessed. “I’ve been trying to accept that I should try and do something about what is going on here, but it has been bad choice after bad choice, and nothing has changed…

“You know, when I first showed up, Dumbledore warned me that I should do my best to try not to get in the way of time playing out as it should, but I think it hasn’t mattered at all, no matter what I’ve done. I can’t change things, even when I am trying to. What happens is going to happen, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

For a moment there was silence, and Harry opened his eyes to make sure she was still there. He would have noticed if she had left, but… he’d done too well with this version of the null ward. He could feel her magic was there, if he focused, but otherwise he did not notice it, and she could be so silent.

“Elves don’t be having ideas ‘bout changing the world, Master Harry,” she said slowly. “But we is doing our best to make our family’s lives better. And our families be going out and being part of something bigger, and bigger, and bigger—elves is not worrying about the world. Elves is not trying to change it, we is just living and doing our piece, and if that changes the world, maybe elves is seeing it, maybe elves is just seeing our families thrive. We’re happier with stronger families. Master Harry is not an elf, but he is being a part of the world, not the whole of it. Maybe he is not seeing how his piece is fitting. Master Harry is doing his part as best he can, and maybe his part is all he can do.”

“My part?” His part was a piece of the wrong puzzle, and he was trying to jam it into place anyways. Harry swallowed, and shook his head. “Hani, I’m not even supposed to be here. I’m supposed to be in nineteen ninety-six, doing… playing my part there.”

She stared at him for a moment, blinking her wide eyes. “If Master Harry were not supposed to be here, Master Harry would not be here,” she said firmly.

“I don’t think you understand, Hani,” Harry said. “I’m not supposed to be here. I’ve been trying so hard not to change the past, but if nothing I do changes anything, if it is already set in stone—there is nothing good that I can make of this. Nothing!”

Hani did not react to his raising voice. “Then Master Harry is being very silly,” she said simply. “Because the past is already done, and Master Harry needs be focusing on the future.”

“Hani, this—all of this is the past, for me!”
“Then Master Harry has already done this?” she asked. “If yous is not knowing what is happening tomorrow, or the next days, or the next, then this is being the present. There is no changing the past, Master Harry; it is already being done. There is only present and future.”

Harry’s mouth was hanging open, ready to try and argue, but he shut it with a snap. There was no point in trying to argue with her. “I wish it were that simple, Hani,” he said, shaking his head.

“It is not being simple, it is being life.”

“Yeah, well, my life is just a little more fucked-up than most peoples’, then,” he muttered, and then regretted it, seeing the way her ears flattened back at his language. She did not say anything, though, not even to reprimand him, and suddenly Harry very much wished to be alone.

A wave of magic rippled through the room, and Hani tilted her head. “Hani is leaving now,” she announced. “Hogwarts is saying what Master Harry won’t.”

And she popped out of the room before Harry could formulate a response.

Harry stared at the space where she’d been. Right. Room of Requirements—it knew what he wanted, and made it happen. And apparently could give the house elves orders. That was—

Wait.

It couldn’t be that simple, could it?

He jumped to his feet and darted out into the hallway before he even thought to check if anyone was in the hall. There wasn’t, luckily, and he paced back and forth in front of where the door sat waiting for him, thinking desperately—I need a way to get back to the nineties. I need a way to travel forward through time. I need to get to the future.

And sure enough, on the third pass, there was a burst of magic as the room responded, and the wall shifted, the door twisting as the stones folded over it, back and forth, making larger, smaller, changing the grain and color of the wood—

And at last it settled again. It looked, to Harry, as it had before—a simple and weathered wooden door set snugly into an alcove—but he had never spent much time looking at the door, and he grabbed it eagerly, opening it to see—

The shrine, exactly as he had left it, the motion of the door stirring up the dust in swirling clouds.

He stared for a moment. It was a fool’s hope, anyways, that there would be so simple an out. After all, even when he tried to fix things, they only got worse. Like this. Like with Regulus and Severus—

It felt wrong to fill the shrine with his anger any longer, and he turned abruptly away, pulling the door shut behind him. He could stew in the tower; Hector and Pandora were busy with the Gobstone tournament, so he’d be alone in the dorm. At least if he went there he could take out the journal and do something productive towards getting back, not this wishful thinking…

But wishful thinking was all he could do, wasn’t it? Harry stormed down the hall, kicking his feet against the stones. He had been wishful in thinking that there was something to be gained from the Dark Lord’s offer, and had sold his soul to the devil trying to fix something he had known was a fixed part of the past—

It had all been for nothing. And there was no one to blame but his own ego. Who was he, to try and
get anything from the bloody Dark Lord? Was he really so stupid to believe Voldemort would give a damn what he wanted? Voldemort was toying with him every step of the way, because he could, and no matter how earnestly Harry struggled against him it was nothing but an amusement to him. Severus, Regulus—there was no reason for them to become Death Eaters this young. Voldemort had said it himself: anyone with the trace was a liability. More likely than not, then, the only reason he had marked Regulus at all was out of spite, a flex of power. And Severus, a halfblood still at Hogwarts… and both of them still right under Dumbledore’s nose, and if they were found out—

Harry came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the hall. His thoughts flickered back to a house full of Death Eater trainees, bright-eyed and eager when Voldemort had shown up. He had said—it was a controlled failure. If some of the kids ended up in the ministry’s hand, it would be to his benefit. It hadn’t worked out like that, with Mael and Thalia ending up wasted in Azkaban, but—then again, Harry hadn’t understood what Voldemort hoped to get out of sending his own people to the dogs, so maybe he had somewhat succeeded, even if they hadn’t been able to serve whatever purpose in Azkaban he had planned. What if he planned the same fate for Severus and Regulus? Or just Severus, more likely; his blood meant he was more expendable… but Harry had known him in the future, so surely he wouldn’t end up sharing Mael’s cell… surely?

But… if the lack of headaches was anything to go by, he hadn’t known Regulus, in the future, while Severus had definitely still been around. Which meant…

His thoughts cut off as there was movement at the other end of the hall. Someone else coming around the corner. There was no turns off between where Harry had frozen and there, which why he couldn’t flee before—

There it was again, the twinge in Harry’s chest as he saw Sirius look up at him, followed by the bolt of pain that shot through Harry’s skull. The proof that he had known Sirius, at least in a greater capacity than Regulus.

Sirius stopped in his tracks, staring back at Harry, and the remainder of Harry’s tottering wall of composure began to crumble. He was, as Walburga and Voldemort had said, a Black, no matter how he denied it. Just look at him—the hair, with his black curls; the eyes, grey and piercing; high cheekbones and the symmetrical, aristocratic face that looked so much like Orion’s; the way he looked at anyone beneath him with such contempt…

“Harridan,” Sirius sneered. “Not in Hogsmeade with your asshole friends?”

“Not-Sirius, Not-Black,” Harry replied, equally coldly, focusing his anger in on the other boy. A reasonable target, where the Dark Lord was not, unless he had a death wish. “I could ask the same of you—but, oh, I forgot. You’re on probation. Because you think that punching someone in the face is fine, and being friends with people is not. Oh, and because your friends, or at least Potter and Lupin, have some concept of human decency that you lack. Merlin knows why they put up with you.”

Sirius’s expression had shifted to a grimace, which might have been a sign that he felt some remorse on someone else, but Harry was willing to bet was more irritation that he’d lost his Hogsmeade weekend. “The fuck’s your problem, Harridan?”

“My problem?” Harry laughed, and started walking, intent on getting around the corner Sirius had come from and back to Ravenclaw Tower, where he could lock himself in the dormitory without people like Sirius who seemed to just draw the words from his lips. “I’m not the one with an inability to admit his own faults. I’m not the one with a superiority complex, who can’t see past his own nose. Leave me alone.”

“You can’t just say shit like that and expect to get away with it!”
“It’s only the truth,” Harry snapped, not turning to look at Sirius as he went by. He didn’t need the headache, or the confusion. Not now. “Hard, isn’t it, to face your faults? Too bad. Leave me the fuck alone.”

If Sirius thought he was being clever, snatching out his wand and flinging a hex Harry’s way now that his back was turned, well, he didn’t know that Harry could sense the spell before it was fully cast. He should, however, have been aware that Harry could defend himself; their previous skirmishes aside, there were only fifteen students in sixth-year Defense, and Quora had a practical component to pretty much every lesson. Harry, at least, had some idea of all his classmates’ skill levels, so it was pathetic to see the way Sirius’s eyes widened as Harry spun, slashing his wand through the air leaving a partial _protego_ trailing behind it, enough that Sirius’s hex ricocheted off of and back into him, sending him toppling backwards. He was on his feet quickly enough, knowing the anti-jinx to whichever tripping hex he had used, but Harry was faster: “Expelliarmus!”

The force of the spell sent Sirius flying backwards again, but his wand flew towards Harry, who snatched it out of the air. For a moment he felt the urge to snap it—but he swallowed the feeling. “I’m taking this to Professor Flitwick,” he said instead, holding the wand tightly, trying to get himself under control. “If you want it back, you can explain to him why despite warning after warning you’re still attacking others in the hall. I wonder where they’ll send you, when you’re suspended.”

“It’ll be you who’s suspended!” Sirius shouted, pushing back up to his feet. “Give that back, you bastard!”

“What the hell would I do that?” Harry snapped. Sirius tried to advance on him, but Harry leveled his own wand. “Stay away from me. I said I’m giving it to Professor Flitwick. You can get it back later, when you’re far away from me.” He clenched his teeth at Sirius’s sputtering. “For God’s sake; you should be thanking me. Professor Sprout said she would support me if I wanted to file a formal complaint against you to the Board of Governors, don’t you get that? You’re just stacking the evidence in my favor. I could get you kicked out of the school. Who knows why I haven’t yet, with all the damage you’ve done…” Severus would have thanked him for it…but Harry didn’t want to think about Severus. He’d left the room to stop thinking about Severus and Regulus and what they had—

He fixed Sirius with another glare. “Don’t try me.”

With that, he spun around and continued on his way; though now he had a stop to make on his way to the tower, he needed to get there. To bury himself in research. To—

But before he could get more than a few steps, Sirius shouted: “Give it back and face me like a wizard, you coward!”

Coward? Coward? Harry was many things, but he was not a coward, and—

That was it. Harry spun on his heel to face Sirius again, the last of his control slipping away. He knew how to make this hurt.

“You know what Regulus said to me?” he hissed, storming forward, never mind that he’d been the one to order Sirius away amount before. “He said it might be for the best that you’re on opposite sides of the war. Do you understand that, Sirius? You’re going to be fighting against one another, and if it gets to that point, you could kill your own brother. You might not even know. And since you’ve cut all ties with your family, you might not even hear about it.”

Sirius took a step back. “I would never…”
“Wouldn’t you? You’d hex someone you don’t even know for being a quote unquote ‘bad influence’ on your brother, and you don’t think you’re going to fight tooth and nail when the war really starts? You don’t think you’ll fight to the death for what you believe in?”

Harry clenched his hand in a tight fist, feeling the beads of the null ward beginning to grow cold—his magic was slipping with his temper. “You know what I think? I think you’re the coward. Potter at least has made moves to change himself, to try and grow up into an adult who is responsible for his actions. You? You hex people when their backs are turned, when they’re alone, because it gives you some measure of control. Control you don’t have over your brother any more, because you left him, and because he’s old enough to make his own decisions, something that doesn’t seem to get through that thick skull of yours.”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know the Blacks—what sort of people they are—”

“Oh, don’t I?” Harry snarled. “Your father seems soft-spoken, but that’s only because he watches and waits so he can tear into you in the worst ways. Did he spend his time making you hopeful for that little bit of praise and then denying it and turning it into an insult? I bet he did—But your mother, on the other hand, she makes her expectations known, and violently. You know, she hasn’t disowned you, formally? You left Regulus behind with the family he values above all else, doing everything they want from him just to be the son who isn’t a failure, and yet she still thinks you’ll come back to her. That you’ll denounce your own ideals because you’ve got Black in your blood, and you haven’t gone far enough to be redeemable yet. You left all the duty to Regulus, but he doesn’t get any of the benefits, no—he gets an even more messed up family, he gets you pretending like how you left wasn’t a betrayal and trying to control his life, he gets saddled with responsibilities and expectations and oaths and still it isn’t good enough for her.”

Sirius’s mouth opened and closed without producing any words. What could he say? Harry could feel his hand shaking with anger, and while he didn’t flat-out say Regulus took the Dark Mark he was certain that Sirius had gotten the message.

“But you don’t think about that, do you,” Harry said. “About what Regulus has to go through because of your actions. And you know what? Fine,” Harry decided, and he shoved the wand back into Sirius’s chest, who barely managed to grab it before it fell to the floor. “You still think fighting is going to solve anything, let’s go a few rounds. You’ve got me now, Sirius; I’m angry enough to fight back. You’re the smallest of my problems, and I could live with the detention I’d earn for going too far in self-defense.”

“You’re insane,” said Sirius.

“Am I? Am I, Sirius? Because I think you’ve been pushing me to fight back for a year, and here I am, and you’re such a bloody coward, now you won’t fight—”

“Mr. Harrigan!”

Harry froze, and turned, slowly. Coming down the stairs from the next level up was Quora, though he shouldn’t have—ah. The time turner.

He forced himself to look at him, and to speak without screaming or launching himself—or whatever hex came to mind—at the man: “Sir.”

“What exactly do you think you’re doing, Mr. Harrigan?” Quora asked.

“Telling Black to put his money where his mouth is,” Harry snapped. “He’s all talk, but when you give him a chance to act on his word—”
“That’s enough,” Quora said sharply, and Harry bit down on his tongue. “Wands away, both of you. Mr. Black, why are you out wandering the halls?”

Sirius’s finally shut his gaping mouth. “Professor Sprout just let me out of detention, sir,” he said.

“Did she? Well. Add two more detentions, Tuesday and Thursday evenings, seven to eight with Mr. Filch.”

Sirius’s eyes bulged. “But sir, that’s—he was the one to—”

“Don’t argue with me, Mr. Black,” Quora said, eyes narrowed. “Needless to say, I will deal with Mr Harrigan. I would advise you to return to your dormitory, unless you would like to add Saturday on to it.”

Sirius opened his mouth again, but for once, seemed to think better of it. Harry knew why: Saturday was the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin, and Sirius flew chaser alongside James. If he had to guess, Harry would say Tuesday and Thursday evenings were their practice times.

Scowling, Sirius shoved his wand into his robes and marched away, down the hall Harry had come from. Quora turned towards Harry, who shoved his own wand into his pocket, resisting the urge to curse the man.

He wouldn’t be angry about much for long if he tried.

“You, come with me,” Quora said, loud enough that Sirius would hear it. “We will be discussing and dealing with this right now, Mr Harrigan.”

They didn’t have to go far—the stairs Quora had come down were just feet away from the Defense classroom. Doubtless he had heard Sirius’s shouting, or perhaps one of the paintings had alerted him, as the closest Professor. Either way, he beckoned Harry into the room, and with a wave of his hand, the door shut behind them, shaking the whole classroom.

He didn’t speak again directly, however, but instead walked to the front of the classroom. There were papers spread across the front table, and four pulled on the side opposite his, which Quora sent gliding back to the tables they had been pulled from with a flick of his wand. Harry’s eyes narrowed. It was an odd time for a meeting with students; Quora must have arranged it ahead of time. An alibi, for whatever it was the new initiates were getting up to that evening. Yes—if Harry pushed past the ward, he could feel the magic of the time turner lingering on him.

No wonder he was in no hurry. Harry stayed in the middle of the classroom, shoulders hunched and fingers playing with the end of his wand, tracking every movement of Quora’s hands, waiting for the promised punishment.

It was well over a minute before the silence between them was broken.

“You’re angry,” Quora observed.

“Of course I’m angry!”

The words snapped out of Harry’s mouth before he could stop them, and clattered against the stone like a wand disarmed. Harry froze. A voice was groaning—no, babbling in the back of his mind, but Harry couldn’t hear it over the silence left by the skipped beats of his heart—

But Quora did nothing more than smile.
“Good,” he said, shuffling the papers about his desk. He could have done it with magic as mindless as the flick of his wand that swung the door shut. He did not. “Good,” he repeated. “Remember that anger. It will serve you well next time you think you can make Lord Voldemort do anything he does not wish to.”

Harry’s eyes darted to the painting on the opposite wall, but it’s occupants seemed unconcerned with—or perhaps unaware of their conversation. Still, his voice dropped. “We had a deal,” he said. “You signed a contract.”

“And so did you.” Quora’s hands stilled as he closed the last of the papers into their leather folder, settling on the latch as it clicked into place. “A contract you came dangerously close to violating as you shouted at Mr. Black in the hall. I intend to honor my side of that contract, and will even go so far as to honor it to the extent you intended it to go.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Like I have any reason to believe that,” he said shortly.

Quora shrugged. “Well, it is your choice. I have been informed that it is easier to follow the lead of someone who you trust, but following, as they say, isn’t exactly my style.”

“I would have to be an idiot to trust you.”

Banishing the folio with a flick of his wand, Quora folded his arms across his chest, considering him. “You are demonstrating an extraordinary lack of sense. Haven’t you studied occlumency, Mr. Harrigan? Haven’t you learned to restrain this sort of outburst of emotion, to limit the exposure of your obvious weak point.”

“Occlumency can only do so much.”

“Hm,” said Quora, unimpressed. “Once again, you let your emotions rule you. First fear, now anger… You know, Mr. Harrigan, once you are out from under Dumbledore’s thumb I think it will be very interesting to see what a proper Dark Arts tutor will make of you.”

Harry scowled. “I have zero interest in learning Dark Arts.”

“Yes, well, we can’t always get what we want, can we, Mr Harrigan? And you are a Ravenclaw, aren’t you? With a particular taste for Defense? I seem to recall hearing of a conversation in which you made a particularly impassioned defense of Defense for the sake of learning the actual Dark Arts. Does the same not apply in reverse?”

It took Harry a moment to remember the conversation Quora was referencing. Pity that it had been in the Great Hall, where anyone might have heard it, or he could have been closer to finding Quora’s spy.

“Defense doesn’t change you,” Harry shot back. “That’s what the Dark Arts do, don’t they?”

“Change is the only constant in life.”

“They are literal dehumanizing!”

“Dehumanization. And it’s not so bad,” Quora said. “Why, between your delving into legilimancy and your gift, I hardly think you count as an unaffected human at all, but that does not bother you, does it?”

“What?”
Quora regarded him coolly. “You do understand that human minds are not naturally equipped to perceive magic the way you do. Nor to perceive the minds of others. Nor glimpses of the future, the way your friend the seer does. You wouldn’t consider her inhuman, would you?”

Harry bristled. Oh, of course he had to bring even more people into this— “Of course not.”

“Well, then.” And then, without preamble, he brought out his wand. “Take off your ward.”

Harry’s thoughts stuttered to a halt. “I—what? I can’t—I’m not going to—”

He didn’t mean to make Harry do Dark Arts here, was he? He—that was—

“It was not a request, and I believed I have already warned you once today about the edge of my patience. Take off the ward, Harry.”

Harry tensed, and for a moment he thought to defy the command—but what good would it do? Whatever Quora had in mind, whether it was intended as malicious or not, it would turn that way fast if Harry disobeyed so openly, and Harry was not a masochist. And so he gritted his teeth and slowly unwound the beads from around his wrist. Quora held out an arm towards the cleared desk, and Harry went forward as slowly as he could before dropping them where Quora had gestured.

“Tell me, Mr. Harrigan: have you been trained to duel?”

Harry gaped at him. “Aside from your games in front of the second years?”

“That was little more than child’s play,” Quora said. “Though a fundamental, which you do seem to have an advantage on, simply dodging is not a way to hold your own in a fight. And I am already aware that you have little experience in the sport. You lack form.”

“I don’t normally attack people, if that’s what you mean.” Though certain Gryffindors and Defense professors did inspire an urge for violence… He’d like nothing more than to punch Quora in the face over what he had done to Severus and Regulus, but he doubted that was what Quora meant.

Quora rolled his eyes. “Shall I rephrase? Prior to coming to Hogwarts, were you trained to fight? Did you have mock battles? Anything?”

Harry frowned, considering it. It was difficult to peg down any specific instances, but he did seem to remember practicing shield charms with a group. “Not to your standards, I’m sure,” he finally settled on. “Spell training, sure… And not Dark Arts.”

“Yes, obviously. You mostly rely on instinct, then.”

Harry shrugged.

“Instinct is a fickle mistress,” Quora said. “It is quite easy for your instincts to be blinded by other factors. Fear. Fatigue. Anger.”

All the things Quora considered weaknesses, and advised Harry to occlude—well, aside from fatigue. “Anger can be useful,” he retorted, clenching his fist. “It can make you act where you might otherwise hesitate. Hesitation in a fight leaves openings.”

Quora looked at Harry, and there was a certain gleam in his eye that, had Harry not been so itching for a fight, might have made him want to run. Instead, it just made his hand tighten around his wand.

“Very well, Mr. Harrigan,” the Professor said, and his wand slashed through the air, sending the
desks to stack along the walls and planting a ward forcefully in place around them, finalized by the clicking of the lock in the door. “Let’s see if your anger is of any use to me, shall we?”

This was dangerous. Very dangerous. A locked room, a controlled Quora, a very, very angry Harry —

Fuck it. Fuck all this—it didn’t matter at all.

Harry slowly raised his wand.
Monday began in a flurry of owls.

Hector caught Harry on his way out of the tower that morning, or Harry wouldn’t have been in the Great Hall to see it, but as he sat at the table, trying to re-read the transfiguration book in hopes that he might actually pass the test at eleven, the owls began to arrive. Not the regular handful, but a hundred, and then another hundred, all carrying copies of the Daily Prophet. Any students that hadn’t gotten an owl were seated by someone who had, and clustered near.

“That’s strange,” said Hector, untying a copy from the impatient-looking tawny owl that had landed in front of him. “It’s my father who has a subscription to the Prophet, not me. They only send it on when there’s been…”

“Extra, extra, read all about it,” said Pandora softly, offering the owl a goblet of water. It eyed her, but bowed its head for a drink before taking off.

Hector didn’t respond, which was unusual enough that Harry looked up from his book, glancing towards the paper but unable to read anything from this angle. The hall had grown loud as everyone spoke at once, but they were all murmuring, and as the three of them had taken the very end of the table, it was difficult to catch more than a few words.

“Hector?” Harry pressed. “What’s going on?”

“Huh?” Hector glanced up, and shook his head. “Oh, sorry, um—here, I’ll…”

He cleared his throat. Harry closed his book, a sinking feeling in his gut, and leaned closer as Hector began to read:

“The calls went out late last night, bringing off-duty aurors to the scene of a horrific crime. The location: a muggle hamlet called Little Stonebridge, no more than a few dozen houses, two pubs, and a shop.

“There was a Post Office, too, until around eleven o’clock yesterday evening, when the aurors say the fire started. It began at the south end of town, and moved from house to house, burning everything in its path. It wasn’t until more than half of the village had burned that the Post Office’s fire detection devices summoned the ‘fire brigade’ from a larger town nearby, but by then it was too late for many of the town’s occupants.

“When the ‘firefighters’ did arrive, there was little they could do. In the houses that had not yet burned, they found the occupants slept on unaware and unable to be woken. The firefighters moved quickly to try and save as many as they could, loading them into automobiles to take them away from danger, but the fire was faster. The water the muggles tried to douse the flames with was completely ineffective, and several of those brave enough to attempt rescues into the houses already burning did not re-emerge. Those tasked with managing the water were terrified and amazed to discover ‘unnatural’ shapes in the fire.

“‘Snakes and demons,’ said one Mr Blake, one of these firefighters, questioned before memory modification. ‘It must sound mad, but it was alive, I tell you. The fire was alive!’
“The muggles were right to be alarmed. While making shapes out of fire is hardly alarming to your average witch or wizard, only a specialist in fighting the Dark Arts would be able to identify and deal with this type of fire: fiendfyre.

“‘Terribly dangerous Dark Magic, that,’ said Alastor Moody, one of the top aurors called to the scene. ‘Tricky to cast, and nigh impossible to control. This case was most likely intentional, but it’s just as possible it was some poor sod who thought he’d go playing around with the Dark Arts and got burned up the moment he cast it.’

“As Auror Moody reported, this it was unlikely that this was an instance of experimentation gone wrong. After all, there was a strong sleeping charm cast over the whole village, one that would have taken several powerful witches and wizards to be able to accomplish. That alone would be enough to indicate foul play, but additional investigation showed that many of the villagers had been victims to obliviation, as well as all manner of undeniably horrible Dark Arts.

“‘We cannot confirm the use of the Unforgivables at this time, but it is not beyond reason to expect that they were used. Unfortunately, without evidence, it is impossible to charge anyone of that crime.’ (Use of the Unforgivables is an offense punishable by a minimum life sentence in Azkaban.)

“There is widespread speculation that it is the work of the so-called ‘Death Eaters’, a terrorist group previously held responsible for an increase in muggle-baiting incidents over the last several years, but the DMLE refused to comment on the rumors— What bullshit.”

“They’re just being cautious,” said Pandora.

“Everyone knows it’s them,” Hector grumbled. “If the Ministry is too afraid to lose face if it is not —”

“Maybe they’re trying to avoid paying them any lip service,” Barty suggested. He was seated a few seats up the table with his own copy of the Prophet in front of him. He was on the same side of the table as Harry, so if he craned his neck Harry could see the picture—flames burning up a house against a dark background, surrounded by aurors working some sort of containment spell. As it moved, Harry could see the ‘snakes and demons’ described, and had a hard time not grabbing his arm, where a not dissimilar snake and skull was branded into his arm. “If they say it outright, it might, uh, make them seem stronger than they are. Make them seem like a more reasonable option.”

“Aren’t you worried, Barty?” one of his friends—Harry couldn’t remember which of the witches was Lenora and which was Tash—asked. “Your dad being with the DMLE, doesn’t this mean he’s, well, right in the… uh, the line of fire?”

“He spends most of his time in an office pushing papers, making executive decisions, that sort of thing,” Barty replied dryly. “And I assume he got the job because he’s good at it.”

Barty. Harry had written the boy on his list of Death Eaters, but while he was friends with Regulus, Harry hadn’t seen Barty at either of the meetings. He didn’t seem particularly blood purist, being friends with Hector, who wore his mother’s muggle status on his sleeve, and Crouch Sr was a big shot in the DMLE. So where would he go wrong? Harry could understand him being a target for recruiting, to have something to use against Crouch, especially if he remained undiscovered, but…

Well, it didn’t matter. If Voldemort kept his word and didn’t Mark anyone else of Hogwarts age, it would be at least two more years. If not (and what reason would Harry have to believe Voldemort’s word), there was nothing Harry could do to stop it. Either way, by then, Harry would have found his way back to the nineties… he hoped.
He swallowed, and tried to look at his transfiguration book again. The test had been a good distraction thus far this morning, but once again, he was reminded how pointless it all was—

“This is awful,” said Hector, still looking down at the paper. “They said that at least thirty people are dead, and the rest of the villagers… there’s only six houses that were completely saved. And a bunch of them are at Mungo’s, trying to reverse the damage from the obliviates…”

“Dunno why they’re bothering,” said another fifth-year. “They’re just going to turn around and do it again.”

“Mind magic needs an extremely delicate touch,” Harry commented darkly, only half aware he was actually saying it. “If… whoever did them didn’t care how much they obliviated, they might have blocked off something essential. How to eat, or speak properly. Or… imagine having to relearn how to read.”

That did it. This was a table of Ravenclaws, after all.

“Merlin,” said Barty, though he alone in the group looked strangely fascinated. “How do they recover from that?”

“It’s not a guaranteed thing,” Hector answered, his voice tight. “Especially for muggles. A bad obliviate is like getting stabbed through a joint; they might be able to recover it, but even with magic it’s never going to work quite right.”

“Merlin,” echoed one of the witches—the one with the pixie cut, this time. “Where’d they say that was? I hope I don’t have relatives there—we don’t really talk to da’s muggle family; they could be anywhere—what are they telling the muggles?”

“Gas leak,” Hector said. “And blaming that for the continued medical problems, as well. And smoke inhalation. Wonder how the aurors are dealing with the BBC swarming the place while they’re trying to investigate.”

“BBC?” Barty asked.

“Muggle reporters. With cameras,” Hector explained, shaking his head. “You know, it’s kind of sick, when you think about it. These muggles are being attacked, and they don’t get to know about it. Every time there’s something big like this, we go muddying up the story so they call it an accident. They must think the world’s a horribly unlucky place.”

“Makes you wonder what else has been covered up,” said another fifth year.

Everyone paused to look at him—he wasn’t precisely ‘in’ Barty’s group of friends, but he was the other fifth year boy in the house. He didn’t speak up much—actually, this might have been the first time Harry had heard his voice, or if not the first, close to it. Harry thought his name was ‘Quinn’—something, something very wizardly with too many syllables.

“What do you mean?” asked Hector.

“I mean, it’s fairly commonplace to obliviate anything that could break the Statute of Secrecy, right? So what about—about policies that might expose us? Like, if someone wanted to fund redevelopment around Diagon Alley, the Ministry is going to have to take control of how that plays out, and the muggles would never know. And that’s only a step away from having a say in who gets elected to what role, so…”

Now they all were staring at the boy. Except Pandora, who was rolling a grape around her plate with
her fork. After a moment, he looked up from the copy of the Prophet he was holding, realized that everyone was staring at him, and flushed a deep red.

“Merlin,” said Cooper Prewitt, whose name Harry did remember, at least. “If I ever go for Minister, you’re on my campaign team, Quirrel.”

The others laughed, relaxing somewhat, even as Harry flinched at the sudden headache. Quirrel? He had known Quirrel? He’d never once paid the fifth year much attention, nor had anyone else, really, from how he was reacting.

“Well, that’s why it matters who gets into office, isn’t it,” Barty said. “You want someone you know isn’t going to go around messing with things…and who is strong enough not to get manipulated themselves. It’s couldn’t be so different to manipulate a Ministry election, would it?”

“There’s systems in place,” Pandora broke in. “Why do you think everyone who wants to vote has to do it at the Ministry after submitting to a full Dark Arts scan? It isn’t a prejudice thing, or tactic against the Dark Arts; it’s to make sure no one is voting against their will. And there’s all sorts of protections on the ballot itself, preventing anyone from finding out who you voted for. And every candidate has to submit to full veritaserum questioning with the ICW, and if any foul play is found out the whole campaign can be suspended. Its once the nominee actually gets to office that people with ill intentions can really start to shake things up.”

“This conversation is wholly unsettling,” the girl with the pixie cut said, looking down at her plate. “I mean, guys… can’t we just stick to being upset about this business with the fire and not go off on a tangent about government conspiracies? I don’t have the stomach for it this early in the morning.”

“It’s all related though, isn’t it?” said Cooper. “I mean… I know your dad doesn’t say much about those ‘Death Eaters’, Barty, but everyone knows they’re up to something at the ministry, too. You’re friends with those Slytherins, too, the ones everyone says are…”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Hector cut in, voice suddenly stern. The fifth years looked at him in surprise. “Look, I agree. These… Death Eaters, if that’s really what we’re calling them, they make me sick. But we can’t just go spreading rumors about people. Especially—” He turned the paper around, showing the image of the burning buildings. “—especially when they’re doing stuff like this. This is—this is terrorism, not politics. Saying the wrong thing about someone at this point could destroy someone’s life. So don’t say it, not to pass on a stupid rumor, not because you don’t like someone, not unless you have proof, and know it’s true. And then…”

“And then you send an owl to the aurors, not gossip about it at the breakfast table,” Barty agreed. “That’s what people like my father are for, after all. Catching these sorts of people and getting them locked up in Azkaban, where they belong.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, and Harry looked down at his plate. He felt like he was going to be sick. When he looked up again, he glanced across the hall to the Slytherin table, and quickly found their sixth years in an animated discussion. Severus didn’t look like he was saying much, but he had a glint in his eye that wasn’t exactly comforting. And down the table, he found the two seventh years he knew had the mark, the witch laughing at something someone else said, the wizard reading over the paper. He wasn’t sure where Regulus was, but it wasn’t here.

Harry swallowed. If he hadn’t known, it would have been so different from any other big news sweeping the castle, but…

He let his eyes drift forward to the staff table. Quora was sitting back, not saying anything, though at the other end of the table Sprout and McGonagall looked pale and furious with conversation. And in
the center of the table, as was the case more often than not, Dumbledore’s chair sat empty.

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For about three hours (three hours of an unusually somber school) Harry thought it was going to be an otherwise normal (if somber) day, wherein he could trudge through occluding and focusing on his books and classes. And then, just before lunch, he caught sight of the newspaper for what must have been the thousandth time, peeking out from someone’s bag, exposing the photo—

He barely made it out of the classroom before he was sick, much to the disgust of the nearby portraits. And unlike most sick, which marked the end of a long stretch of nausea, for him it was the beginning. By all Madam Pomfrey’s estimates, he was suffering the lingering effects of magical exhaustion, and maybe she was right, and it was all a coincidence, or maybe— He wasn’t going to correct her. The curtains were pulled shut around one of the infirmary beds, and he lay curled on his side, positioned so that his bruised ribs pressed down on where he knew the Dark Mark sat, as though he could squeeze it out, the tingling of poor blood flow almost covering the lingering pain.

He couldn't get it out of his head. He hadn't been there, and he'd avoided listening to discussions of the extended details, or looking at the additional photographs within the pages, but no matter his many exercises and occlumency techniques he ran his brain through, he could still see it, clearly as though he been there, still smell smoke and hear screams, and laughter— And when he tried to place the memories, the pain in his head was so sharp he would've been sick again, if there were anything left for him to vomit.

He hadn't been there, hadn't participated as the real Death Eaters had participated, but he hadn't stopped them, either. The shapes in the fire was the same mark seared into his arm. He hasn't been there, but he was complicit. He hadn't been there…

Even if he had been, he wouldn't have been able to stop it. What was he, but a bit of jetsam to this timeline, rubbage flung about the tides of the real powers…

Eventually, he fell asleep, and when he woke, the horror was dulled some. Not gone, but separate enough that he snuck out and spend the rest of the afternoon drinking ginger tea and burying himself in his schoolwork in the kitchens.

After that, Harry re-committed himself to avoiding the Great Hall. How could he not, knowing that everyone there would either hate him, rightly, for the mark that still ached on his left arm or, worse, would admire him for it? Knowing he’d be sitting by Hector, who still believed in him, and Pandora, who… if she knew what he’d been through recently, she hadn’t said a word, and he didn’t know what to make of that, except to hope she didn’t know. And the thought of Quora faithfully attending each meal while Dumbledore was absent? It made Harry angry.

Angrier than he already was, that meant. On Tuesday, when he was scheduled to assist with the second-year classes, it took every ounce of Harry’s self-control to keep from screaming at the man or storming out of the room. Normally the second years delighted in pestering Harry with questions, but his mood must have been showing clearly on his face, because even the Lockhart kid was unusually subdued.

At the end of the second block, Quora had raised his eyebrows at him, but Harry didn’t stick around for an argument or a lecture. And if he was a bit violent in pruning the Venomous Tentacula, well,
no one could really blame him—the plant was a menace. No one would have guessed it was their Defense Professor that was really the cause of his ire.

But on Wednesday, when he had to deal with Quora both for the two hours of class in the morning and at office hours in the evening, Harry thought he was going to explode. It was probably for the best that the second through fourth years had big exams over the next two days, because by the time he dragged his feet back to the classroom there was already a crowd waiting for help. Harry hadn’t even needed to go up to the office: Quora had remained at his desk at the front, and Harry had taken the table closest to the back, focusing solely on answering questions about dark creatures and basic defensive charms. It was almost enough to forget how eager he was to storm out again.

Almost. Then the six o’clock bell rang, and twenty minutes later Quora shooed the stragglers from the room, and when Harry grabbed his bag from the back of his chair, intent on following them out, Quora called, “Your assistance, Mr. Harrigan,” and even if Harry was angry he wasn’t going to risk refusing a direct order.

He sighed, turning around, looking to where Quora was standing from behind his desk. “Move these tables, Harry,” he said as he gathered up his papers. “Up against the wall.”

And then he pivoted sharply about, climbing the stairs to his office. Harry glared at the door for a moment, before turning to hang his bag up on the hooks by the door, out of the way, before regarding the tables with displeasure.

He felt Quora re-emerge a few minutes later, pausing at the top of the stairs. “You’re still angry with me.”

“What does it matter?” Harry grumbled, shoving a table harshly towards the wall. Behind him, Quora sighed and took his wand out, and with an unvoiced spell had the rest of the desks out of the way. Harry, feeling foolish, scowled at them.

“It matters because we work together,” Quora said, coming down the stairs. “And while I do not particularly care for your emotional state either way, I find it tiresome that you allow it to affect you and the work you do.”

“I can mark while angry. I can help kids pass their tests while angry.”

“Perhaps. But marking schoolwork is not all that you are committed to do for me, and if I were to order you into battle right now, you’d be all but useless. Perhaps even harmful, if Sunday was anything to go by.”

Harry turned around slowly to find the man shedding the heavy black over-robe he wore while teaching, leaving him in a fitted, high-necked, sleeveless grey robe that fell just above his knees over a more flowing black robe cinched at the wrists. It was a similar style to what he had worn in class when they had demonstrated dueling for the second years, though more fashionable and less functional.

“Sir?” he said slowly. “Are we…”

Sunday, they had dueled. Well, that was a kind way of putting it; more accurately: Sunday, Harry had spent a good ten minutes dodging, which was about as much as he could manage, and getting thrown about the classroom like a rag doll. He’d woken up the next day with bruises on the back of his thighs and shoulders and ribs and elbows, but somehow he got the picture that Quora hadn’t meant it as a punishment. He’d looked like he was having too much fun, knocking Harry down into his place. Not that either of those were things that wouldn’t happen if he were punishing Harry, but
he wouldn’t have held back, either.

Quora responded by swinging his arm in a long, slow loop, and Harry could see the shimmer of wards settling in around the walls, in front of the tables. “Yes,” he said. “Take off your ward. You won’t be needing it.”

Harry scowled, but complied, depositing the null ward in the pocket of his robes and taking up his wand instead, shaking off the feeling of unease that the transition out from the ward brought. *Let’s see if your anger is of any use to me,* Quora had said on Sunday, and while he’d never said one way or the other whether it was, it certainly filled Harry with an agitated energy he didn’t have any other ideas for how to let go of. And while realistically he didn’t have a chance of actually doing any damage, it was a chance to fight back against Quora with everything he had. If he did manage something, Quora couldn’t be angry at him for it. More likely, he’d be pleased.

Well, if he were in a rational mood. Harry didn’t know, yet.

“Have you had a chance to review your shielding since Sunday?”

Harry blinked. Thinking about it now, Quora had critiqued them rather pointedly, but Harry had been too agitated to take the criticism to heart. There were more crucial things—things he couldn’t possibly set aside. “Er…”

“No matter,” said Quora, bringing up his wand. “We will simply drill them into you the practical way. Like so—”

And he jabbed his wand forward, a red flare of spell-light bursting through the air, and Harry had just enough presence to wrench his focus away from the man’s entrancing magic and dodge.

And so it went. Quora was relentless, sending curse after hex after charm after jinx, often building up chains where Harry’s first shield would be of no use to the second or third spell. Harry realized quickly and painfully that he had a habit of bracing himself and locking his knees when he cast his shields—it was apparent enough when he was being knocked back or hit with stinging hexes or conjured objects because he couldn’t get out of the way fast enough. Quora didn’t pause his onslaught or give Harry any tips to fix it, but Harry could just make out a glimmer of approval on his face as Harry adjusted.

Or maybe he was just enjoying every time one of his spells connected.

And the spells he used continued to get stronger, and stranger. Harry rolled out of the way of a yellow beam that made a sounds like crickets as it flew by, and looked up just in time to spot a red flare coming his way and block it with a shouted *Protego!*, only to feel the stones beginning to shift under his feet and jump up, into a stinging hex so underpowered he barely even registered it, especially when it was followed by a curse of some sort in yellow that struck his left arm and made it go completely numb. He frowned, but didn’t have time to cancel the spell, as Quora summoned a steady stream of birds, not even bothering to hold back a laugh as Harry had to run to avoid them, shooting an *incendio* over his shoulder that managed to catch several of the birds in the burst of flame, though not all. He rolled out of the way as a few particularly fast ones zoomed faster, and jumped up, taking the chance to cast the *finite* he needed before dodging back from the birds again, not wanting to find out what they’d do if they caught him—

And suddenly Quora let out of a burst of magic much more powerful than anything else he had used to far, and Harry’s breath caught in his throat. It was sudden, it was bright, and so powerful he couldn’t breath—
Everything went black.

No—not black. Away; everything went away, he wasn’t seeing anything, not black or white or grey, just…. nothing. And it was… silent.

Magic flared in the emptiness and Harry stumbled back, away from—it must have been one of the birds, getting too close—and fell, though he didn’t have time to wince in pain as he scrambled away from another spell, hand scraping against the stone as he tried to ground himself. He wasn’t fast enough, and this one struck: another stinging hex that, from the pinch of pain against his cheek, was just as underpowered as the last, only this one he registered as loud and clear and—

Harry’s breath stuttered in his throat as his mind began to catch up again, because like this—like this, clinging to the ground as the only proof he was still present in the moment at all—Quora was—was—

Terrible, but great, a voice whispered from the recesses of his mind, where his thoughts seemed to be growing louder against the silence. He shuddered at the fragmented memory, a ragged edge to the obsfuscus that was fragmented from all context, and pushed it aside, and tried to focus on getting to his feet, because if he stopped, if he let Quora’s magic rule him… he didn’t know what it would take to bring him back out again.

It was like a black hole, where Quora stood; all that magic compressed and constrained into so small a space. Or a diamond vial that held a poison gas that would with the smallest crack leak out and fill the room, taking over completely. It was bizarre, in a way, because magic did not move within the same physical constraints as anything physical did, and yet despite this it was undeniably far denser than Harry could comprehend—and he was witnessing only the shell. Within—

Well, That was where He was hiding his true colors, wasn’t it?

Harry swayed as he tried to find his balance, now that he was back on his feet, but it didn’t last long: he noticed Quora gathering his magic to late to do anything more than dodge, and wound up on the floor, wincing as his tail bone impacted against stone. He probably swore, too, though he wasn’t sure entirely if he said it aloud or just thought it loudly. He wanted to scream, because he knew, logically, as he tried to climb back to his feet, that the ground was flat, and there was no magic disrupting that, and yet it felt like he was trying to find his balance on the ocean. Quora sent another spell before he was steady, and he stumbled away, barely managing to keep his footing. And then another spell—couldn’t he let up? He probably thought this was funny, the—

Harry managed to stumble out of the way of another spell, and directly into another stinging hex. He wasn’t thinking straight—he needed to focus. He needed to get out of this spell. After a beat of consideration (he couldn’t spare any more, knowing Quora) he jabbed the tip of his wand towards his chest, and began, finite in—

Finite incantatem!

That bastard had taken his voice, too! He could feel his mouth moving, but there weren’t even the slightest vibrations in his throat. He stumbled out of the way of another spell, wincing as his ankle rolled. No sight, no sound, no voice, and no balance—what did Quora expect him to do? Resign?

But he jabbed his wand at himself again, anyways. Non-verbal spellcasting wasn’t a particularly strong suit of his, but he knew he could pull it off. He’d done it before, under less dire circumstance. He planted his feet, getting as sturdy as he could, and focused, directing the magic to his wand as he would any other spell and thought as precisely and forcefully as he could manage—Finite incantatem!
Another stinging hex struck him, this one on his hand, and not as restrained as the others had been. His wand slipped from his grip, and only Harry’s quick reflexes let him snatch it out of the air, and only then because it had its own magic that he could trace as easily as—

That was it! If a *finite* wouldn’t work, he’d have to get ahold of himself a different way. Pivoting from another spell, he jabbed his wand at the ground and cast the first spell that came to mind—*colovaria*.

The effect was instantaneous. Who knew what color he had turned the floor; what mattered was that the magic spread out from the point his spell had connected, and while he still couldn’t see the floor, with the magic imbued in the surface he still had a sense of the space beyond what he had before. Quora’s spells paused for a moment, probably as he tried to figure out what Harry was doing with the charm, but when the next one came it was easier to keep his footing. And the next easier still, and the next, growing confident, he tried *protego*—

But whether it was the wrong shield or his spell had simply been too weak, he was knocked back again, and Harry’s wand went zooming off into the man’s other hand. *Damn it!* How did he deal with this? What was Quora expecting?

For the moment, it seemed Quora was expecting that Harry needed to collect himself, as he paused, waiting, wand still aloft but his magic contained. Harry gritted his teeth—it felt *wrong*, his wand in that man’s grip, rejecting that overwhelming magic from even forming a connection—but took the chance to focus, trying to locate the hold of this curse. It was difficult, already being so tainted by Quora’s magic, with the Dark Mark in his arm irreparably tethering him and the gaes lingering in his throat. But he did, after a minute, and then his scowl and panic deepened, because—

Quora’s magic was in his brain.

He struggled back to his feet, not daring to stay still, not when his throat felt tight like he was going to forget how to breathe, too. He wasn’t by any means an expert in anatomy—they’d studied the musculoskeletal system for transfiguration, but not the brain—but he knew that if there was one spot Quora’s magic could do the most damage, it was there. It was worse than when he used that spell that let him directly control Harry’s limbs: this was, potentially, everything. Even if he could still see or hear, he wouldn’t have been able to trust that any of it was real, not with Quora’s magic there. And if he couldn’t trust what was real—

He didn’t have time to worry about it. Quora was rallying his magic again, and this time it was definitely not for a disarming charm or stinging hex. It wasn’t directed at Harry, either, but split, dividing up around him, and down into the floor, and once the ring had fully formed it began to act. The floor cracked into hundreds of smaller pieces, floating up in the air, and Harry resisted the urge to spin around. It would do him no good; if Quora did something he would—

*There!* He jumped back out of the way as a single piece of stone went flying towards him. It disappeared into the circle on the other side, but not before two more were fired and he dodged—*ow*—well, he dodged one of them. He scowled in Quora’s direction, though all that did was send another piece for him to dodge—

Dodging practice? Really? That couldn’t be all Quora wanted from him; dodging was the one thing even Quora couldn’t deny Harry was good at. He’d kept up for their demonstration to the second years, hadn’t they? And he’d been doing well enough until this bloody curse—

And then the pieces began to move all at once. Not towards him, thankfully, because no amount of experience in dodging would have gotten him out of the way of rocks coming from every angle, but in chaotic loops around him, each carving its own path through the air. It was dizzying, frankly, and
when the next stone detached and came flying towards him, in his attempt to step away, he stumbled over his already hurting ankle, but this time Quora didn’t pause the onslaught, and Harry had to roll out of the way of three more stones and jump back to his feet again. He might have wondered what good came out of this, only he didn’t have time to think, not if he didn’t want to get pelted.

Even if he had time, it wouldn’t have mattered, because the moment Harry thought he was doing alright—well, as well as could be reasonably expected, considering—what came barrelling through the chaotic mess of stones but a stinging hex, terribly bright and loud, like a raptor charging through a swarm of flies. Pain blossomed in his knee as it struck, and he stumbled, and it was the falling that broke him out of the daze.

Really? A stinging hex—that was all it took? He pushed himself backwards, out of the way of some of the stones, wishing desperately that Quora would just end this damn curse because he wanted to scream in frustration at how easily he was being torn apart what little confidence in dealing with magemetry he had developed… and also because it was bloody terrifying, being stuck like this, and worse too in that he could not express it…

But Quora did not care about whether Harry expressed his fear; he cared about sending another spell through the whirling stones. Harry tried to jump up and out of the way, but it was, apparently, the same hex that had hit his arm earlier, and it hit the same leg that had caught the stinging hex and made it go numb, upsetting Harry’s balance even further. That, luckily, Harry knew could be dismissed with a finite, but he didn’t have his wand, and as he stumbled, another spell came through, and Harry felt even more powerless—magemetry was the one thing he had, like this, the one thing stopping him from being beaten to a pulp, and yet with the swirling stones, it was impossible to tell…

What did Quora expect? Did he want to hone Harry’s reflexes? To stop him from relying so much on magemetry to be able to—no, that didn’t make sense; if he wanted that, he wouldn’t have cursed everything else away, and he wouldn’t have had Harry take off the null ward. Besides, as far as Harry could tell magemetry was the only thing that had made Quora so intent on bringing him in as a Death Eater. He waxed on about how it was Harry’s ‘gift’, and had taken him to the meeting without his ward on, convinced that Harry would somehow be of any use to him in a crowd—

Oh.

Oh.

That was… surprisingly straightforward. It didn’t make it any easier to accomplish, knowing what Quora wanted, but… If Quora was trying to get him to focus through an overwhelming amount of magical information, then for once Harry could see the purpose. After all, if the null ward were to break again, he’d be stuck facing the world unfiltered, and…

He’d thought about it: how much time he’d lost to staring into space, trying to reign himself in. How much further in his research could he be, if he didn’t have a ‘habit’ of zoning out, of losing track of what he was doing because there was magic vying for his limited attention. If Quora had an idea for how to get Harry to be able to control this, it didn’t matter whether he was the Dark Lord or the king of Timbuktu: Harry would try it.

Identifying the problem was all well and good, however, but the trouble was that Harry didn’t know how to overcome it. He couldn’t pull himself away from magic; he didn’t know how, especially not without his other senses to distract himself with or something to ground him. And unless he called Hani, there was no one here, no one except…

Except Quora. It would be killing two birds with one stone if he could manage it. He’d focus on Quora, and then any of the spells, he’d be able to track, because they’d be coming from him. The
stones… well, for the moment, getting hit by a few rocks was less terrifying than the wider range of
curses Quora could send his way once he lost his patience, and while Harry couldn’t think of
anything more terrifying than sensory deprivation at the moment, he wasn’t foolish enough to doubt
Quora’s creativity, either.

Harry jumped out of the way of another spell, and this time, when his now numb leg gave way, he
wasn’t annoyed. Instead, he pressed his palms against the stone, and dug past the color change spell
he’d laid across the floor, reaching swiftly for the magic that coursed through Hogwarts. It wasn’t
particularly strong in this particular section of floor, and it was almost white noise to Harry now, after
over a year of sleeping in the castle, but it was there. And once he grabbed it, and felt his magic
racing out to try and follow it—there was the disruption where the stones had broken up from the
floor, but Harry paid them no mind; he stretched out beyond, and—

For a moment, time seems to stand still, waiting for Harry’s mind to catch up with his magic as it
stretched to the farthest reaches of the castle, to the owls waking in their tower perches to the old
things that slithered in the darkness down below, and out to the wards circling around them. He
knew it all at once. The stones Quora threw? They were numerous, but small; but leaves in the
forest, and all on one bough of one tree, and while Quora might be the tree that stood tallest he was
still only one. And Harry knew Hogwarts; he had spent so many nights meditating and learning the
students who filed through the halls, the paintings and their single fragmented plane lining the walls;
it was familiar. And he drew himself back in, up past the dungeons and the kitchens and the hospital
wing, down from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor towers and past the library, drawing himself to the the
first floor and back in—

But he stumbled, on his way, and it wasn’t because of the stones or spells. It was Dumbledore,
Dumbledore who was perhaps even more powerful than Quora, but cold and bright where Quora
smoldered dark and smothering. Dumbledore, so rare to find in the castle these days, was here, now,
on the stairs down towards the first floor, his magic announcing his direction and intention, and that
was here. That was—

If Dumbledore came here, if he saw, he would know. Know about the magemetry, and—would it be
worse, to see the man regard him as some sort of freak, for this thing he could do that shouldn’t be
possible, or to see the distance between them grow as Dumbledore realized Harry had come to him
for help but still kept secrets? And where there was one secret, there were always more, and if
Dumbledore was like Quora he’d be curious, and Harry’s secrets had always had the power to end
things—but not yet. No.

He tore himself away from that approaching, glistening star, back to Quora, just in time to meet the
focusing for a spell and dart out of the way. He needed a way to tell Quora, but Quora had taken his
voice. He tried to signal with his hands, but waved one straight into the path of a stone. Quora wasn’t
going to stop. He needed to tell—he needed magic.

But his wand was in Quora’s grip, and voiceless casting was one thing, wandless quite another.
Even Quora, the only one Harry could remember flaunting his power so as to use wandless magic
for everyday things, stuck to just those: pushing and pulling and moving things through the air. What
Harry needed was to create a voice to speak for him. That would be an illusion, but when Flitwick
taught them the illusion it had taken hours of practice to focus the magic and get right. He didn’t have
hours, or the lifetime to learn to focus his magic so precisely without a wand. So, then, he would do
it with, and that meant…

If it really his magic brushing against the rest of the world that gave Harry magemetry, then he knew
how to direct it. He found the trace of his wand, so familiar, and directed everything towards it, until
he knew it as well as if it had been in his own hand, and then he took a deep breath and—
—pulled, and ignored the stones still striking against him, because he had to focus, he had to, and with one last frantic burst of force his wand flew out of Quora’s grip, and came snapping into his hand, and before Quora could do anything about it he drew it up and focused through it the magic for the illusion spell Flitwick had taught him, focussed on nothing more than producing a voice—a voice to stand in the place of his own and call—

Dumbledore’s coming Dumbledore’s coming DUMBLEDORE’S COMING

After a second, the pieces from the floor stopped whirling. Then the spell dropped, sending each flying through the air back to where it came from, making Harry’s mind whirl at the speed and sudden release of magic that followed, but he didn’t have long to linger because a moment later he was clapping his hands to his ears and squeezing his eyes shut, gasping as senses returned to him and everything seemed too loud, too bright—but he let go again quickly, because not that the magic in his brain was gone he could look at Quora and see—

Well, he could see Quora with his blank-faced, bright-eyed stare, a look like hunger, an owl’s gaze narrowing on a mouse before it struck, and Harry could see his wand as it was summoned from where he had dropped it to the floor—the nearly neon green floor—and tossed back to him. He caught it, somehow, but the magic was still screaming for attention, and all of it together was too much and his head was pounding in a way that was only getting worse as Dumbledore got closer—

He remembered the null ward moments before Dumbledore opened the door, and shoved his hand into his pocket, breathing out a sigh of relief as he did so. It must have been a strange sight for Dumbledore, as he paused in the doorway, looking back and forth between the two of them.

“Headmaster Dumbledore,” Quora said, summoning, somehow, the appropriate level of respect. If Harry hadn’t known… well, that was the point, wasn’t it? If he couldn’t pass Dumbledore’s scrutiny, there would be no point at all.

“Professor Quora,” Dumbledore said, and he smile serenely before amending—“Tim. I thought I felt this side of the castle shaking. I must say it is a relief to find you and Mr. Harrigan, rather than a mountain troll.”

“While Mr. Harrigan does occasionally move like a troll, particularly in his footwork, thankfully there is no real troll here, Headmaster,” Quora replied. “You will excuse me if I do not teach that lesson as a practical. I can’t abide the smell.”

“It is dreadful.” Dumbledore’s smile didn’t waver as he glanced over Harry, who was still wide-eyed after the curse, and panting, and probably looked no better than he would if he had run into a troll. He swallowed, trying to compose himself. “Might I enquire what practical lesson you are teaching Mr. Harrigan?”

“It is not him I am teaching, though I am doing my best to correct his form as we go. You may have heard from Filius and Minerva that he has some skill with dueling?”

“I did.”

“Making him useful for in-class demonstrations. It gives the students a chance to see someone a bit closer to their own age using magic in an exciting manner.” He paused. “That being said, I don’t want them to pick up any bad habits watching Mr. Harrigan, so here we are. The fifth years are reviewing shield charms this week, and with any luck we can drill it into their minds how important it is to be able to call on the right charm at the right time.”
News to Harry. He didn’t say anything.

“Perhaps I will have to stop by to see Mr. Harrigan in action myself,” said Dumbledore. “However… for now, might I suggest that supper is in order? Growing wizard as Mr. Harrigan is, he must eat regularly, or more than his footwork will become troll-like.”

Quora frowned, making a show of drawing out a pocket watch he’d apparently kept on him even in his dueling robes. “Yes, I suppose we must,” he agreed. “Until tomorrow, then, Mr. Harrigan? Remember, three o’clock.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, shifting his schedule about in his mind.

“Headmaster, if you have a minute that we could discuss the curriculum for the fourth year students,” he heard Quora say behind him, but Harry didn’t stick around to hear how that conversation played out. He grabbed his bag off the hooks by the door and raced out of the room.

It was never even a thought to go down to the kitchens, let alone the Great Hall. Instead, he made his way to the Room of Requirements, and fell to his knees in front of the shrine, burying his head in his hands.

What was he doing?

This was Quora—this was the same man who went out of his way to mark Regulus and Severus, just to show Harry that the contract had no meaning, to flex his control—This was Quora, and yet…

He was so tired, so exhausted by it all. He couldn’t even muster the energy to cry.

It had happened again. He’d been so caught up in the duel, he’d nearly forgotten. Not who Quora was, but what he was: the enemy. Even if Harry had sworn an oath to serve him, well. He’d gone into the contract with even less sincerity than Voldemort had. He’d agreed to it, and done so well enough to satisfy the Dark Mark; becoming a Death Eater was the only real way to try to fight back, at least in his position, at least as far as he could tell. He would serve Voldemort in practice, but in mind? In spirit? He would never devote those truer parts of himself to a Dark Lord—

And that’s what Quora was. A Dark Lord. A power hungry egomaniac who Harry had made the mistake of believing would play by the rules—any rules at all—and Harry could not forget that.

If he did…

There was no point in even considering it.

Chapter End Notes

Where am I in life, that an 8,000 word chapter feels short? Haha....

Just popping in to say thank you again to everyone who has continued to read and comment on this fic! I know my schedule has gone from excessively predictable to excessively uncertain, but I will say I'm about halfway through writing chapter 33, a third each through 34, 35, and the epilogue / bridge to part two (...whether part two comes soon or far), and while I won't be able to finish by new years as I had originally planned, I'm glad to be making progress again! And everyone's support has been a huge help in that; I originally planned this later, darker section of the story to help me push my
boundaries as a writer, and it's definitely... doing... that. Since I've been working on this story for so long, I've gotten to the point where I can read parts and it is almost like someone else wrote them, for or worse, and the for better is I still feel really strongly about certain aspects of the story, and love delving into these characters, as awful of places as following them sometimes takes us. I'm so glad to have y'all along for the ride with me!
Beginning to Blur

Chapter Notes

I just want to emphasize a few content warnings for this chapter: On-screen violence, including torture, death, and intrusion of the mind, leading to disassociation and other negative mental effects.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We are going out, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said. “Tell me, did you get enough for lunch?”

Harry looked up from the essay he was grading, frowning. It was Saturday—five o’clock, apparently, by the tolling bell. Outside was growing dim.

“For lunch?” Harry echoed, confused. By ‘going out’, he couldn’t mean… ‘going out to eat’… could he? Quora was unpredictable, but that was just…

“We have business to do, and I need you in top form. And it is nearly suppertime. Do you need to eat before we leave?”

Oh. That was at least… somewhat understandable, if he didn’t think about it too hard. Or, at all, really.

“Depends on what sort of business you mean, sir,” said Harry, looking back down, scrawling the final mark before tapping the remaining ink off his quill back into the bottle. “Most of what you’ve brought me along to I wouldn’t want to face on a full stomach.”

“Something light, then,” Quora said, standing. That didn’t really give Harry an answer, but he gathered together the essays and went to the chair Quora conjured for him anyways.

Following the horrible news of Monday, and the dueling practice Harry wanted nothing more than to forget, the week had been quiet. Harry’s anger had given way to confusion, a return in full of every ounce of self-doubt he’d felt and tried to push aside since first laying eyes on Voldemort only three and a half months prior. He was still avoiding as much direct conversation with the Professor as possible, spending the whole of the fifth year practical he’d helped out with on Thursday acting as the partner to the odd Hufflepuff out, only slipping into his own class time at the last minute and rushing out the moment the bell rang, not saying a word during office hours. For whatever reason, Quora had let it pass, not even greeting Harry when he had arrived at the office that morning, instead simply pushing a file full of third-year essays forward without looking up. Until that question, they had inhabited the office in mutual silence, punctuated only by the scratching of quills, flutter of paper, and distant bells.

Harry wondered if there was a focusing charm settled among the wards the man had put on the room. Logically speaking, Merlin knew the essays couldn’t possibly be interesting enough to hold his attention, and yet here they were, seven silent hours later.

Quora stepped out beyond the wards, returning a minute later with a plate stacked full of ham sandwiches. Enough to feed a whole classroom of people, Harry thought.
“Useful creatures, elves, but I do despise the manifestations of their zealoussness,” Quora sighed. “They are particularly pathetic creatures, wasting so much time grovelling, acting in such excessively overblown response to the smallest request…”

“I would think you would enjoy that, sir,” Harry said.

“Is that the impression you get?” Quora set the plate down, gesturing for Harry to take one, ignoring them himself. “I don’t care for grovelling, Mr. Harrigan. I care for results. Consider yourself. On a good day, you are civil, but most of the time I get to suffer through your, ah, witticisms. And yet, so long as you are not openly disrespectful when there are other people to consider, it is your effectiveness in following orders and producing results that I judge you on. Grovelling is a sign of inefficiency. Incompetence. Known, identified, and yet unresolved. Pathetic. I have no time to spare for those who are intent on wasting it.”

Like Travers, Harry thought, but this time he took a bite of sandwich instead of saying it. Even the thought of Bella’s… treatment of Travers had Harry repressing shudders. No need to remind Quora of the man’s failure…

“Take Travers,” Quora said, after a silence that stretched a full minute, Harry swallowing the memories with the bites of sandwich.

Well? Sorry, Travers. Harry did try.

He suddenly didn’t have much of an appetite.

“A normally competent wizard tasting his first bout of failure. And instead of railing to resolve the issue, what does he do? He grovels. It is frankly insulting, the waste of talent.” Quora paused. “Are you done with that?”

“Er,” said Harry, quickly forcing down the last bite of sandwich and nodding. Quora looked vaguely repulsed.

“Then take off your ward, Harry. You won’t be needing it,” the Professor said, standing and holding his hand out for it. Harry hesitated only a moment before complying, and as he readjusted to the magic in the room it disappeared into one of the drawers of Quora’s desk. After that, Quora beckoned him to come around, and presented his hand to Harry, the familiar coin he used as a portkey resting neatly in his palm.

“You know,” said Harry, even as he took the man’s hand, shuddering at the discomfort of being directly in contact with Quora’s magic so soon after taking off the ward and the way his long fingers crushed Harry’s hand. “You can make portkeys out of anything. Like something larger, so we don’t have to—”

The portkey activating cut Harry off, which was probably for the best, and when they landed again Quora promptly let go of him. “These are convenient, as you will see,” he said, ignoring the way Harry was stumbling as he turned and summoned familiar black robes from the other room of the dusty house. “Get dressed.”

Harry frowned, but caught the robe before it could barrel into him; an improvement, of sorts. “Where are we going?” he asked before bunching it up to pull over his head.

“We will be visiting the home of the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, Eleanor McKinnon,” the man said as he cast his disguises, shifting his face from defense professor to Dark Lord. “Normally, the Undersecretary is either an overworked, young rising star among politicians in charge of all the
real work the Minister has no interest in getting done, or a political ally granted the title after assisting the Minister in gaining office. In McKinnon’s case, she is somewhere in between. She holds a seat on the Wizengamot, as well, and is firmly in the camp of non-partisan voting. And that is why she is of value at this stage.”

“Why does that matter?” Harry asked, tugging at one of the sleeves of the robe, which had gotten rolled into itself. “If you’re trying to take over her vote, it doesn’t matter if she is a Lit or a Lib, right?”

“No one will be expecting her vote to fall consistently one way or another. If she were a Lib and we had her vote Lit, people would notice. Now, Travers has been in charge of swaying her cooperation without a fuss, but he has failed, and she has proven too stubborn for her own good. Bella, as you might recall, offered to deal with the problem much more directly. But I tire of waiting for others to get anywhere, so we are joining in on her fun.”

Harry shuddered at his memory of the witch, realizing a moment too late that Voldemort had turned around. “You don’t like Bella?” the Dark Lord asked, raising a brow. “No… You fear her. And you haven’t even spoken to her, or seen her in action… To think, all this time there was a shred of sense in you.”

“She has less control than a first year,” Harry explained, ignoring the jab. “Wands are—they’re supposed to work to focus magic, right? To make it easier to direct and use without wasting energy… She uses a wand, but I don’t know why she bothers, ‘cause she throws everything else out with it.”

Voldemort, for whatever reason, chuckled. “How inefficient,” he said. “But she is rather like you in that sense, isn’t she?”

“What?” That anyone would compare Harry to a witch that violent, who took joy from others’ suffering…

“Do you think you have more control? Perhaps on day-to-day spells, but Bella can restrain herself on those, as well, if she so desires. I suppose you have only seen her perform an act of passion. It would be a more analogous to compare to your desperate immobulus, I think.”

Harry frowned, tugging on the sleeve some more, even though it was already free. “I mean her magic in general. Sir. It’s… When you, um, let yours loose, it is intentional. But even then it’s… hers is just… wild.”

“And yours is different?”

Harry didn’t have an answer for that. He couldn’t sense his own magic—but Voldemort looked thoughtful.

“Perhaps it is. You are air, and she is fire, after all,” he went on. “But you find it so difficult to keep yourself controlled that you have resorted to wearing a ward, Mr. Harrigan. Perhaps you should carve one for Bella, if she bothers you so much? Not that she would wear it, but it would amusing to see her insulted…”

He paused as Harry shook his head frantically. At least Voldemort gave him a hood, and planned to keep him anonymous… for now, at least. His life was stressful enough without that Bella knowing who he was. Or… anyone, if they were the sort who chose to become Death Eaters.

“In any case, we will have limited time until the aurors arrive,” Voldemort said, pushing the topic
aside. “Your job will be to alert us when they do. Most likely they will be attempting to catch us by surprise, and to get some reliable eyewitness accounts of crimes to charge with. Preferably we would like to be alerted without showing them we are aware of their presence, but use your discretion. If the choice is between revealing that we know they have arrived or not knowing, the first is the better option.”

Harry nodded slowly, beginning to understand why he had been brought along. “Every one of your people there will be marked?”

“In this instance, yes; all of our allies will be.”

“Okay,” said Harry, focusing on the task, ignoring the broader implications, ignoring Voldemort’s correction of his phrasing. “…I should be able to do that.”

Voldemort was unimpressed. “You had better be. If you are not, I will be incredibly displeased.”

Harry swallowed and nodded again. The commentary had been more trying to convince himself, after all—sure, dodging the auror was illegal, but if it was all he was to do, to alert them, then that meant he wouldn’t really be… a part of…

He must have looked queasy, because Voldemort sighed, beckoning Harry over again. “Keep close, but out of my way. And don’t fight unless someone else engages you first. The last thing we need is you doing something stupid and getting caught.” He grabbed Harry’s arm tightly, and before Harry could brace himself the were away—

—and landing again in a dizzying blur. Voldemort completed his turn, dragging Harry with him across a ward that sent shockwaves through Harry’s brain before he let go. For whatever reason, it was the release of his grip that made the world tilt sideways. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head to clear it, clinging, as he did so, to his disgust to drown out the alarm—had he really just used Voldemort as a grounding anchor? The Dark Lord who could overwhelm Harry without hardly trying?

When he opened his eyes again, it was because Voldemort was walking away, following a driveway up to a brick house. Harry could tell there were a good number of Death Eaters waiting inside, the trails of their Dark Marks tangling into a web, which was particularly bizarre now that Harry looked back at the street. It was disorienting how ordinary and muggle it was. There were even cars in the other driveways, and muggles out on walks under the last glow of a cloudy sunset, and yet here were Harry and Voldemort apparating in out of nowhere in their black robes, unnoticed…

But there were two layers of wards surrounding the property, which Voldemort had landed them precisely in between, and if the inner ward was blocking apparition, then the outer must have been obscuring them from the muggle’s notice, because no one even turned a head.

The door opened before Voldemort reached the step, revealing a witch with all to familiar magic. Bella. She had her hood off, and when she bowed low, her hair tumbled over her shoulders.

She was, undeniably, beautiful, with heavy-lidded eyes, a slender, symmetrical face, and long, shiny black hair that looked straight out of Sleekeazy’s advert, a few strands slipping forward to curl around her high-boned cheeks. Moreover, she carried herself with a confidence that said she knew exactly how she looked, and an intensity about her that said she knew exactly what she was doing, whether that was gazing at the Dark Lord through her thick lashes or arching an eyebrow as she caught sight of Harry.
“Who’s the shrimp, my lord?” she asked, stepping aside so that Voldemort could go past, her crude words clashing with appearance and haughty accent. “The sentry you spoke of?”

“Yes. A friend of your cousin’s, with a delicate constitution. Play nice.”

“Which cousin?”

“Regulus.”

“A friend of Reggy’s!” she exclaimed. Something in her tone and expression shifted, away from barred hostility towards… what, curiosity? Maybe that was just Harry, who was definitely wondering how the hell Bella could possibly be a cousin to Regulus. Well, he could see a relation to Walburga… and to Sirius… but Regulus? She was… so… “Do we need to deliver him to a wetnurse along the way?”

“That would rather defeat the purpose. Why isn’t your hood up?”

She huffed, turning to follow him. “Roddy thinks I should wear the mask, my lord. But there is only one, so of course it should be you.”

Harry shut the door and hurried to catch up, following them into a perfectly ordinary muggle kitchen, walls papered in a cheerful yellow day lily pattern, where the other Death Eaters were bowing to Voldemort as he entered. Four were standing around the kitchen island, looking ridiculous wearing hooded black robes in that context. On the island sat a metal mask, skull-like, but stylized in a fashion unlike anything Harry had previously seen, a juxtaposition of rigid geometry forming the base and swirling embellishments in between. There were enchantments woven into it, though as it sat unworn they were stagnant, waiting for a bearer.

Voldemort paid his bowing followers no mind, moving directly to pick up the mask, tilting it this way and that in critical investigation. “What did Lord Malfoy say about the changes?” he asked, looking to one of the standing Death Eaters. With their hoods up, Harry couldn’t see their faces, but he had the suspicion Voldemort could see straight through the charms. That, or he too had some sense of the Dark Marks, and could identify each individual by them.

“He said that it was up to you, of course, my lord,” a man’s voice replied.

“And?”

“…and that we are running a revolution of politics, not fashion, and that we might was well just cut holes in the hoods—he hadn’t had his potions yet, my lord.”

“You are the craftsman, Antonin,” said Voldemort. “Regardless of whether we do end up using them down the line—are you satisfied with this iteration? Enough to send it into battle?”

‘Antonin’ hesitated. “I would, but not on you or Bellatrix, my lord. It is copper, not suited for fire-element magic.”

Voldemort hummed, and even being surrounded by unfamiliar wizards Harry could still feel the way he focused his magic into his fingertips, as keenly as if he were pushing it into Harry himself. It was enough to activate the enchantments, the pulse running along them like a spark down a fuse, but Harry could see how it stuttered. Like how Harry magic had flowed when he cast the first null ward, he imagined.

“You made it suited to yourself? Water?”
“Yes, my lord.”

Voldemort set it back down on the island. “Make one to each element, and then we will see about testing them. Your craftsmanship continues to prove worthy.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

The matter closed, Voldemort turned back to Bella. “We are ready to proceed?”

She smiled, a dangerous glint in her eye, and looked around the kitchen, the Death Eaters that had been lurking against the walls stepping forward. It was then that Harry realized how young she was—no more than her mid-twenties, Harry thought. And yet Voldemort was letting her lead. Several among the others gathered here were older, if the strength and control of their magic was anything to go by, though few seemed as confident in themselves as she was.

It reminded Harry, for a moment, of Thalia, the girl who Voldemort had put in charge of the other children in the mansion. He wondered, for a moment, if any of those gathered here were from that group, but then he remembered Azkaban, too, and he pushed the thought aside.

Any one of these people would murder him at a single word from Voldemort, he would bet. This wasn't the place for doubt. Or getting lost in memory.

“We are ready to proceed,” Bella agreed. She gestured to a group clustered by the kitchen table. “Those five will be around the other side, out in the woods, waiting for our call. Travers is leading the group into the house. Antonin’s boys and I will be outside with you. After that—”

Her smile widened into a grin. Harry did his best not to shudder.

“After that, you will get to enjoy yourself, yes. Put your hood up, Bellatrix. We are leaving.”

With a wave of his hand Voldemort withdrew several coins from his robe and floated them through the air towards the waiting Death Eaters. Portkeys, Harry realized, not unlike the one Voldemort used to take them between Hogwarts and the first house. As each person grabbed theirs, they disappeared one by one, until only Harry and the Dark Lord were left standing there, the last portkey hovering between them.

Voldemort raised an eyebrow. “Something the matter, Mr. Harrigan?” he asked.

Harry swallowed and shook his head, quickly reaching out to grab the coin. A moment before it activated, Voldemort apparated, and so, after the horrible twisting and lurching sensation deposited him in a heap in the grass, the first sight he saw was the Dark Lord, still looking down at him with his eyebrow raised, who knows how many miles away from where they had just been. Apparition, it seemed, was faster than portkey.

He filed that thought away and scrambled to his feet, trying to ignore the way the world was still spinning, his magic slow to catch up to him. He wasn’t the only one on the ground, at least, though it seemed the other two had collided with each other, from the way they were sitting up and bickering. Someone cleared their throat, and the bickering stopped, and the pair jumped to their feet, both swaying a bit.

Voldemort sighed, put up his own hood, and turned to Bella, who in turn clapped her hands together, spinning around and marching away. “Let’s get moving!” she called over her shoulder. The rest of the Death Eaters shambled after her.

Harry, uncertain in his place in this, stayed a few paces behind Voldemort. It was only a two or three
minute walk until the trees thinned out, and through the gaps and the dim light Harry was able to make out a clearing containing a house, the lights inside pooling out onto the grass in front of it. A group split off the moment they saw it, though had Harry not had magemetry aiding him he would not have known, for how quietly they moved. His magemetry also revealed a single layer of wards, not terribly powerful but present, though before Harry had decided whether to bring it up Travers slipped ahead of the group and cast something that made the magic ripple and pull away, leaving a glowing arc that Bellatrix led the others through.

And Bellatrix—what a contradiction she was. Loud and outspoken when Harry had seen her before, now silent and purposeful with her prowl. She distributed orders with hand signals, the Death Eaters fanning out through the trees. Harry did his best to stick close to Voldemort, trying not to startle at every cracking branch or crunch of leaves.

And then they were at the edge of the clearing, and Voldemort beckoned Harry forward, to stand with him and Bella behind the sparse branches of a smaller tree. And when he spoke, his voice was barely more than a breath: “Inform us when the other group has ceased moving.”

Harry swallowed, but nodded, closing his eyes, pushing out beyond their cluster to re-locate the other group. But as he did, he could not avoid finding the presences inside the house. They were grouped together—sitting down for dinner, perhaps, two strong and one weak—

He tore himself away from them.

This was real. This was what the mark on his arm meant. He could try to stop the group, to warn the occupants of the house—but for what? His own death, or worse, and whatever was coming would still come. He may have been brought on this… mission, but there was no way it was dependent on his participation. Voldemort wouldn’t risk that.

So he pushed past, trying to ignore the family—the McKinnons, Voldemort had named them—God, please; somebody—anybody—until he had stretched his senses to fill the wards. There was no trace of the others, and Harry frowned, opening his mouth to question that—but then there was another break to the ward, not unlike the one Travers had created, and through it emerged the five who had split off from the group.

He waited until they were in place before opening his eyes again. Voldemort and Bella were both watching him. He nodded, resisting the urge to lick his lips.

Bella looked back into the trees, gestured, and led the way forward, out onto the grass. Harry forced himself to keep with them, but when the group paused, Voldemort gestured for Harry to move back a few steps, closer to the line of wizards behind them.

“Will you give the signal, my lord?” Bella asked, her voice seeming to fill the silence.

Voldemort raised his wand.

The windows shattered, exploding outwards, and over the cacophony of the shards of glass striking each other and the grass, he heard someone scream, and though he could not hear them through the noise Harry could feel six pops of apparition off the lawn around them and into the house. A moment later, the door swung open, and figures began to emerge—Death Eaters, dragging out three others: a witch, a wizard, and a girl who had to be nearly Harry’s age, but her magic was…

Oh. A squib. At least, he thought; she felt different from muggles, who only held the faintest traces of magic, just enough to prove that they were alive. She had more, enough that she might have matched some of the less powerful children at Hogwarts, but it was as wild and out of control as a
first-year’s on at the opening feast. It was also strained, and weak, for her age. Like Voldemort’s and the mask, her magic flowed through her body but they were completely unmatched.

A squib. He hadn't listened at the meetings. Death Eaters tortured muggles, and despised muggleborns… but squibs…

Harry swallowed, and focused on her parents, perfectly ordinary in their magics. He didn’t know if the Death Eaters’ violent hatred extended to squibs, but Voldemort didn’t need hatred.

“Madame Secretary McKinnon,” Voldemort said formally, striding forward and bowing low to the witch. There was a line of blood matting her hair against her forehead, but she stood tall, wrenching her arms out of the Death Eater’s grip. “How exciting to finally meet you in person. I’ve heard so very much.”

“The pleasure is all yours, I’m sure,” she said coolly.

“I’m sure it is,” Voldemort agreed. “Bella, if you please?”

Bella stepped forward, dragging the squib girl with her and throwing her to the ground. The girl cried out in pain, and her magic moved frantically around her, but it did not accomplish anything.

“She has nothing to do with this!” the witch screamed, even as the Death Eaters grabbed her again.

“Of course, Madame Secretary,” Voldemort said, drawing out the title with pointed sarcasm. “If she did, it would be you on the ground, and her as the stubborn fool. Of course, she’d have to have gone to Hogwarts with her sister. How unfortunate for her to be born without the chance. But she does have some use…”

Bella cackled, drawing out her wand, at the same time as the witch lurched against the grip of the two Death Eaters now holding her back, escaping one but not the other, but whatever happened next with that altercation it was lost to Harry as Bella delightfully cried “Crucio!” and her magic descended.

It was worse, worse than it had been with Travers, because the girl’s magic was already so unhinged. And while the Death Eaters seemed untroubled by the curse—interested, even—the girl’s parents were screaming, which made up for the silence from the girl—her mouth was wide, but there was no sound emerging; her body flopped about like a rag doll, Bella’s magic tearing apart what little there was of the girl’s—and it seemed to stretch on forever, until—

A pause. Had Voldemort called for it, or had Bella gotten bored? Harry wasn’t certain. He was busy trying to breathe, trying to hold down the threatening vomit—

“Come, Madame McKinnon,” Voldemort said smoothly. “There is no need for your daughter to suffer, is there?”

“What you want will only make things worse for her!” McKinnon snarled back.

“Oh?” said Voldemort. “You hear that, Bella? It sounded to me as though the Madame Secretary does not believe things are bad for her daughter.”

Bella laughed again, and brandished her wand, and this time she did not stop, and Voldemort watched dispassionately as the girl thrashed like a fish on dry land, surrounded by air but unable to breathe—her magic in tatters around her—

And something snapped; a bone or the magic, and that was enough—
“Stop!” Mr McKinnon cried. “Stop, please—”

Voldemort raised his hand. Bella’s spell cut off, though the girl was left twitching, limbs puppeted into violent, sporadic jerks against the ground.

It had been a bone. Her arm was not supposed to bend that way. Harry didn’t think—

“Madame Secretary?” Voldemort asked. “It is your participation that will end this.”

The girl’s voice finally broke through again, a whimper of pain. Bella kicked her, and the girl, having no strength left, flopped like a rag doll. *Her arm was not supposed to bend that way—*

“Yes!” Madame McKinnon finally called, her voice stretched thin. “Yes, fine—just—just stop—”

“Excellent,” Voldemort said. “And I believe you have previously received the terms we have proposed, although…” He glanced over at the girl, his gaze joining Harry’s, which hadn’t been able to leave her. “I’m afraid I will require a more *permanent* vow than was offered you, if this is how you are going to behave. We wouldn’t want any ideas of, oh, going back on your word, would we?”

She didn’t reply, even as Voldemort beckoned Travers forward. “I think an Unbreakable Vow will do, don’t you?” Voldemort said. “Oh, don’t look so horrified, Madame Secretary; we’ll bind you to a friend of yours. Walter?”

Travers offered McKinnon his hand. She stared at his hooded head for a moment, and then spat—“Traitor!”

Voldemort’s response was swift: he flicked his wand towards the girl, and she shot several feet into the air, held for a moment, and dropped sharply again, landing in a heap with a muffled cry.

“Apologies,” he said plainly. “You sounded like you were in need of some encouragement. It would be Bella’s joy to provide more, if necessary?”

McKinnon clenched her jaw tightly, and reached out to snatch Travers hand, staying as far back from him as she possibly could. Travers gave a sharp yank, making her stumble closer. She scowled, but didn’t retreat.

Voldemort took another step forward, and laid his wand on their clasped hands, but it was Travers who spoke:

“Will you faithfully and to the best of your ability work with me in promoting and voting for the legislation we intend you to in the Wizengamot?”

McKinnon hesitated, and Bella began to twirl her wand in her hands, eyeing the girl, who was shaking, now—or maybe it was Harry, who couldn’t not look—

“I will,” McKinnon said hollowly.

A thread of red light, flickering like fire, burst from the point where Voldemort’s wand was settled on their hands and wrapped about them, but it was not just Voldemort’s magic, Harry realized; it was all three, twisting together, the reaction creating the light.

“And will you henceforth take no action against the cause of the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord, nor encourage others to take action?”

Her eyes darted towards her daughter again. They stayed there.
“I will,” she whispered.

A second thread wrapped the around their hands, intertwining with the first, binding them even tighter.

“And will you guard this vow as secret from anyone not sworn to the service of the Dark Lord?”

She swallowed, and looked back towards Travers.

“I will.”

The third, final strand came forth, winding with the others. For a moment, it looked as though it was going to cut into them, it was bound so tight, but then Voldemort cast the final spell and pulled back his wand, and the flames instead sank into their skin. The moment they were out of sight, the magic darted up McKinnon’s veins, wrapping itself tightly around her, like a noose just waiting to tighten. McKinnon let out a gasp, and quickly let go of Travers’ hand.

“You’ve gotten what you wanted,” she said.

“So we have,” Voldemort said. “And it is simply wonderful that we have come to an accord, Madame Secretary. I would hate for all this work to be wasted. Bella—” And he paused, gesturing to the girl still shaking in the grass, who lifted her head and looked to her parents, wide-eyed and hopeful. “—dispose of that.”

Bella laughed, brandishing her wand, and the wizard let out a bellow and tried to charge towards his daughter, only to be caught by Travers, who knocked him to the ground. And Bella did not seem to notice, single-minded in her task—

“Aavada Kedavra!”

Green light, and a scream—

“You should be grateful, Madame Secretary,” he could hear Voldemort saying—far, far across a sudden, endless sea—“She would have never found a place in our society, and if she left to join the muggles, she would have always been a risk. And had she stayed, well. Without magic, what use would she ever have? Now, your husband, on the other hand…”

He circled his wand about, and directed something towards where Travers had Mr. McKinnon pinned with his boot on the man’s back. The wizard screamed as the curse settled into him, and Harry could see why—it wasn’t the Dark Mark, but it was similar in that it was a piece of Voldemort’s magic alive and waiting and connected to him—

But Harry was still staring at the girl and her unceremonious death, the magic severed entirely from her body slowly dissipating. It was, for once, something that drew him more fully than Voldemort and his spells. It was—it was—

Voldemort spoke again, but Harry wasn’t listening. He was frozen in place, but his mind and magic was frantically scrambling, trying to catch the traces of the girl, reaching every way to hold it together and push it back to her body. It was—wrong. More than just the death, the way the—the spell did not just kill her; it, like the cruciatus, tore her apart, rent her in two—

It was—it was—

And then he felt it. Around them, creeping up in place: wards. Just inside the ones that already existed. At the base of them—and creeping forward through the trees—
He fell to his knees. Distantly, he heard a voice—one of the Death Eaters, mocking him for his weak stomach—but he was torn, torn between the sudden influx of magic from every direction and the girl, the magic drifting away from her, the magic that had just a minute ago been held under Bella’s onslaught—

Then someone grabbed his arm, and yanked Harry back up. He was snarling something, but Harry couldn’t comprehend beyond the magic wrapping around him—what was—it spiked through him, and the breath seemed to choke out of his throat, and for a moment: clarity. The Dark Lord was inches from his face, his magic reeling, preparing to dive into Harry’s mind—

No. No. He couldn’t—He killed her—Harry would give him what he wanted; he couldn’t see—What he wanted—oh.

“They’re—” His voice seemed to come from somewhere else, and his lips seemed to be moving out of pace, and he was looking anywhere, anywhere but the girl, but all he could see was her body twisting, back bending—“here.”

Voldemort spun around, dropping Harry to the ground, just in time to catch a burst of red spell light heading his way, and slashed his wand through the air, leaving a trail of inky darkness that the red light hit and seemed to absorb into—to Harry, it was like cannibalism, Voldemort’s magic baring its teeth and swallowing the attack.

And Voldemort twisted, then, and the magic folded and spun, and it burst forth, crashing like tsunami in every direction, knocking everyone still standing off their feet. The climbing wards began to crumble as their casters were thrown back, but Voldemort did not seem to notice the way they fell, or how the trees and house shook; he was on to the next spell already, magic surging not just from his wand but from every inch of his being and swirling in a dark shield around them. Their attackers seemed to recover just as quickly, and sent a volley of spells their way—but the shield snapped shut just before they hit, and drew the magic around them in for strength—

Drew all magic. Her magic. Harry could see her, lying there on the grass, cold and still as the moonlight—

Then Voldemort was towering over Harry.

“How many?” He grabbed Harry by the shoulder, pulling him up again, and Harry shuddered, but managed to tear his eyes away from the girl and chase after Voldemort’s face swaying through the air. “Tell me how many, Harry.”

His magic was crackling violently, another wave pulsing out into his shield. Slowly, Harry lifted a hand, pointing to the trees, though it was shaking too violently to be of use. “Th—three, there… two, there… three… n—no, five, five behind the house…”

Voldemort let go of him, and Harry stumbled, but this time managed to stay upright as Voldemort’s wand danced through the air, weaving magic in a complex pattern until it became fire, which shot out, bursting through the shield and, in an exercise in precision, over the heads of his Death Eaters this time, setting the trees aflame.

And that was not the end, no—now that the trees were burning, the Aurors spilled forward, their red robes glowing in the light, spell after spell flying through the air. The Death Eaters sprung into action as well, and Mr McKinnon grabbed his wife, who had run forward and was huddled over her daughter, casting *enverate after enverate* to no avail, and pulled her towards the house. The Death Eaters paid no attention to any of that, caught in battle, but Harry—
Voldemort’s twisting shield had sent the girl’s magic in every direction, and the absence was like a black hole, pulling him in—

A spell hit Harry in the back, and he went down, hard.

A moment or a minute later, he was on his feet again, not knowing how he had gotten there, but the grip Voldemort had on his shoulder was a good indication. There was another shield around them, and Voldemort had something in his hand, which he pressed into Harry’s before letting go—and then the world was spinning—

—Harry gasped and his knees struck stone, the coin portkey dropping to the floor and oscillating about faster and faster until it finally settled into silence.

Hogwarts. He was back at Hogwarts. Huddled on the floor behind Quora’s desk.

Frantically he tore off the black robe, horrified that he had been sent here still wearing it. He searched the office, needing a place but unable to focus on anything long enough to properly consider it, and at last he settled on yanking on the drawer of Quora’s desk. He didn’t actually expect it to open for him, knowing Quora had wards on everything, and so he nearly fell back when it did. Before he even had a chance to shove the robe inside, he spotted something else: the null ward. He’d forgotten all about it.

He snatched the beads out, wrapping them tightly around his wrist. And then, as he was cut off from the surrounding magic—from the feeling that he was still haunted by some traces of the girl, her magic slipping away—he slowed down enough to fold the robe before shoving it into the drawer.

And then—

And then, what? Quora hadn’t given him orders; he had just shoved the portkey into Harry’s hand and sent him tumbling back to Hogwarts, and here Harry was, shaking and heart thudding against his chest and his wand still in his hand—when had it gotten there? He hadn’t— Had he? It had all happened so fast, and he—

He looked around the office again, half convinced he was going to find a red- or black-robed wizard in one of the shadows. He didn’t. It was silent. Still. Without its owner, there was a certain coldness. Not as though Quora warmed up the place or anything, but in his absence it was as though in stasis, without purpose—or perhaps Harry had no purpose for it, without the man. Either way, to stay here felt intrinsically wrong, like he did not belong, like the platter of ham sandwiches abandoned on the desk did not belong. Like even being here was violating some fundamental principal—

Maybe there was a spell, mixed in with the wards. Maybe it was the threat of being found out, of Dumbledore with his remarkable timing coming knocking on the door, finding Harry alone in the office and that robe in the drawer. Of Quora not returning from his trip, or perhaps returning with suspect injury, and eyes turning on Harry as well. Or perhaps returning angry, with Harry in range as a target to expel his wrath upon.

And Harry?

Let one thing be known about Harry: when it comes down to it, he is going to survive.

He ran.
Harry took a deep breath, the three hundred and fifty-ninth since he stopped and tried to do nothing more than breathe. That’s what meditation was, in a way, at least according to the occlumency book. Every thought beyond breathing acknowledged and dismissed, or tucked carefully behind walls he could not see past, to examine later. In that point of an emptiness, the book said, he would have complete control over his emotions and his mind, and even the best legilimens would be hard-pressed to grasp any of the thoughts that drifted through.

Harry was failing. His breath, long and drawn out though it was, was shuddering, stuttering against his shaking knees, and his hands felt cold and numb from the last burst of chaos, the panic taking hold to throw him into doubt.

The mark was burning. Harry wasn’t moving.

He’d run to the shrine room, of course. He couldn’t recall whether he had passed anyone in the halls—if he had, he hadn’t paid them any attention before slamming the door shut behind him and coming forward, pressing his hands against the stone ledge and finally letting the sobs come. And he had spoken, the words tumbling from his mouth, begging and willing himself to forget the girl’s absence, the wrongness of her death—for the horror of what he had been part of, that night—he had even put his wand to his temple and summoned the energy for an *obliviate*, but his hands had been shaking so badly it had slipped from his fingers fallen down onto the ledge, and when he blindly fumbled for it his hands had found incense instead, and so he had lit it, and let the sobs keep coming, begging, until he had become too exhausted and dropped to the stone.

And then he had breathed, or tried. And now—

Now the mark was burning, and as the magic of it cut through the null ward he couldn’t help but trace the flare back to the source, which was getting closer, and closer, but Harry couldn’t bring himself to—

Behind him, Quora opened the door. Harry didn’t move, even as he heard the man pause, and then step forward, shut the door, and move to stand just behind Harry.

“Are you a spiritualist?” Quora asked after a long stretch of silence.

Harry took another breath, and shifted his damp face and slowly lifted his head up. “Am I what?”

“A spiritualist,” Quora repeated, gesturing to the shrine.

Harry looked over at it. On the altar, the incense had burnt out, but the smoke and smell hung in the air. “I don’t know what that is,” he said. His voice was quiet, and thin, and dull.

“Oh,” said Quora, and he stepped forward. “Most wouldn’t. It was a practice that had all but died out before I even came to Hogwarts. There are pockets of it, however. I wouldn’t have been shocked to hear that your coven practiced.”

With his left hand he picked up the woven red strings, adjusting until the center, where the intricate knotwork gave the illusion of two bands twisting into one, rested in his palm and closed his fingers around it. With his right hand he wrapped the tails around his fist, tucking the ends in, and then turned to the incense holder, where the Room had provided a fresh stick, which Quora lit by passing his hand over.
“After all, I learned about it from a coven of witches in Romania,” Quora went on, as though Harry had wanted to know. As though this were one of the impromptu lectures that sometimes unfolded when someone asked just the right question in office hours. Harry stared at him, wondering if he should be scared, but now that Quora was here, it was difficult to muster anything more than a vague submission to helplessness and a great expanse of emptiness. Whatever Quora wanted, to give a lecture or to torture Harry to the brink of death… it was only at that brink that Harry could dare try and fight back.

If then.

He was so tired.

“In the years following Grindelwald’s downfall… and Hitler’s, Europe was… chaotic. Perhaps you know your muggle history better? When the muggles’ war ended, they held their conferences and trials, signed their treaties. Put up the Berlin Wall, started talking about the Iron Curtain, left live ammunition in the fields. Gas. Mines.”

Drawing his wand, he tapped it on the carved rock, and the shallow indent filled with a liquid—some sort of oil. Then he summoned a leaf that Harry did not recognize, and he had to set his wand aside again to roll it against the ledge, crushing it into a paste with only his finger against the castle’s stones.

“When Grindelwald was defeated, he left behind pockets of magic. Curses. Traps. Anti-apparition wards cast through dark rituals, which require dark rituals to be undone, or curse-breakers. And ministries filled with the same problems they had before—corruption. Stagnation. Only with less money than before, making everything starker—the poverty. The greed. You don't have to be bombed or cursed to die from a war, you just have to survive it long enough to starve. The Governments did nothing, and more covens began to form, taking advantage of the chaos to declare themselves beyond the power of anyone else. The one I found in Romania was hidden in plain sight, mixing in with muggle ‘witches’, unable to be reprimanded by their ministry in case in doing so they accidentally revealed the existence of the magical world to those muggles who made potions and laid so-called curses through muggle tradition alone.”

With care Quora collected the remains of the leaf and moved it into the oil, blending them together, and after a moment, with another wave of his hand, this burst into blue flame. He seemed unbothered by the way the remnants on his hand burned as well, waving his fingers in front of his face with a blank expression until the flames flickered out.

“I was working as a cursebreaker while I travelled. No matter where you went, there was always curse breaking to be done. The coven there did not pay me in gold, but they let me stay in their homes. Among their people. As a group, they still practiced spiritualism. They let me watch, but the very concept made my participation impossible.”

He turned slightly towards Harry, gesturing to the remaining items: the three-pronged black candelabra, the bundle of sticks, the darkened picture frame. “Every practitioner gathers their own collection. I have read that originally it involved travelling to observe different modes of faith, and to cherry-pick from them items that would become part of your own shrine. A wholly appropriative practice. Eventually it changed, and the items became whatever carried, ah, spiritual meaning to the practitioner. If this is not your shrine, then for whoever used it originally, this specific collection meant something. Supposedly, the stronger the bond with the items, the more powerful the ritual. However…”

He reached down to pick up the wooden mallet from the brass bowl, and held it in the smoke of the blue flame for a moment, before slowly drawing it away and tapping it against the side of the bowl.
A note, low and clear, filled the room, and as Quora drew the mallet along the edge of the bowl, Harry stared, wide-eyed, a shiver running down his spine.

Maybe it was the smoke from the incense and the oily mixture, blending together into a sweet, familiar fragrance that Harry couldn’t name. Maybe it was the noise, the way so small a bowl produced a sound that seemed to ring in his ears as it echoed around them. Maybe it was Quora’s magic, or the Room’s, both of which seemed to fall into the pulse of the tone, moving as smoothly as a body breathing, as rolling waves brushing up against the shore of the Black Lake. Maybe it was everything together—the sound, the smell, the bone-deep weariness that had settled in him since he had stopped struggling to breathe—but the effect was hypnotic. Mesmerizing, in an entirely muggle way, no spells drawing his attention or affecting the sound. And yet…

He could see Quora’s mouth moving, but didn’t hear whatever it was he was saying. In the picture frame, green-black though the canvas had turned, he thought he saw something move. And the dish on the wall… that was the most confusing part. There was no spell at work, and if it was magic that did it, it was magic Harry did not recognize, but as Harry watched he saw the brassy surface shift, and the blurred reflection of the room became clear. Quora’s face, cast with blue light and sharp shadows, stood out in it in a skull-like, ghastly image. And Harry, all but in shadow, squinted at himself, trying to make out his own face, which in the reflection looked—

Quora struck the bowl again with one final note, and Harry blinked, realizing how far forward he’d leaned, and settled back before Quora could look down at him. When he looked up again, the surface of the dish was cloudy, the reflections blurred. Quora slowly opened his left hand and the cord, ends released, unraveled, dropping down onto the ledge.

“It is a bizarre practice,” Quora said, voice same as before. Quiet, but unaffected. “When I first saw it, I thought that it was something they had picked up from the muggles, but it turns out it was developed by a group of British wizards in the fourteen hundreds, aristocrats who could afford international travel. For whatever reason, it spread, and became common even in places where formal religion is the way of life. Ritualistic it might be, and fascinating to watch, and I suppose rather comforting for that practitioners get to go out and lay claim to items and use them as their own, to choose what they want and ignore the rest. It falls rather short in the face of religions with thousands of years of tradition and story behind them, I think. Though they are all rather lacking, to me.”

Picking up his wand again, he waved it over the stone, and the remaining mixture disappeared, the flame flickering out. For a moment, there was only silence.

Quora’s head turned slowly. His hand came up, and stretched over Harry’s head, and his fingers unfolded—

Even through the null ward, Harry felt it: the way his magic stretched out and filled the gash Harry had left in the wall of the Room before, greeting and entwining with the echoes of the memory like an old friend.

And then, at last, he let his hand drop, and looked down at Harry. “Is anyone out in the hall?”

It took Harry a moment to process what he said, what he was asking. He’d been lulled into a sense of… place, within the walls of the Room, and even without the null ward it was strangely difficult to push past them. But Quora wouldn’t want to hear that, so Harry pulled himself to his feet, swaying but managing to stay upright, stumbling back to avoid colliding with Quora's outstretched arm, and turned his back on the man, opening the door just far enough for there to be a gap—and slipped his hand from the ward—
He shuddered as the bottled energy from the altar, whatever it was, swept around him and out of the room, but forced himself to focus, rather than to chase after it or mourn the loss. He didn’t have space in his heart to keep mourning.

“No,” he told Quora after a moment. “This floor is empty, except for… The Grey Lady, I think. Closer to the tower.”

“And between here and my office?”


“They are no trouble. Go. To my office.”

On the stairs down, Harry nearly tripped, but was caught by Quora’s impossible reflexes, his hand snagging the back of Harry’s robes, lingering as he guided Harry forward. Had anyone been in the halls, it might have been an odd sight, but even the portraits barely glanced their way. And then it was into the Defense classroom, and up the stairs to Quora’s office, where Quora finally let go as he pushed Harry forward.

The wooden chair had obtained a sticking charm since Harry had sat in it earlier, keeping it firmly in place as Harry toppled into it. He swallowed, and tested the boundaries of how far he could shift—it was stuck to his robes, thankfully, rather than a wrapping restraint like the first time had been, and he kept his sleeves carefully away from the armrests—as Quora went around the empty desk and summoned himself a glass of the golden alcohol he kept in a side cabinet.

He took his seat and stared across at Harry, toying with the glass in his hands. Harry did not dare to break the silence—even if he’d had anything to say, he wouldn’t have—and then, in the distance, the bells rang.

“I am disappointed, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora said when the last toll faded away.

Another pause. Harry waited.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Harry stared at his hands, clasped tight against his knees. He wasn’t sure which were doing the shaking. He said nothing.

Quora sighed.

“Crucio.”

This time, it was worse. Not only because he was expecting it, and knew to fear the pain, and was resigned to his fate, but because even as he thrashed about against the wooden chair, grabbing at the arm rests only for his hands to become stuck in place, head thrown back producing a voiceless cry of agony, he still couldn’t shake the image of the girl in the grass and the way Bella’s magic tried to devour her, and if it didn’t hurt so bad the clarity of the memory was enough that he might be sick, but he felt like his throat had collapsed and his ribs were driving sharpened points into his lungs and the acid in his stomach had been lit on fire climbing up his chest—his magic pulling away from him
“When I ask a question, Mr. Harrigan, I expect it to be answered,” Quora said coldly. It must have been over, Harry thought, because he could hear the words clearly, even if it felt like he was drifting through space. He opened his eyes and watched as the world revealed itself as nothing more than a grey blur—and only after he dared try to move did he realize he was staring at the ceiling, and his glasses had fallen off as he had been thrashing. He strained to lift his head up of the top of the chair back, and the momentum of it carried his whole torso forward, so he was doubled over, staring at his knees and the floor. The sticking spell must have released with the crucio. His hands were shaking, yes, but not as violently as they were swimming in front of him. He closed his eyes again, struggling to take a breath.

“Well, Mr. Harrigan?”

God. Quora, he— Harry had to say something. He couldn’t go through that again, he couldn’t—

“What was the question, sir?” he rasped out.

“Why did you fail to notify us about the aurors until they were right on top of us?”

Harry flinched. The aurors. He’d almost forgot about them.

“I…” he started, but he wouldn’t get away with ‘I tried’, and he wasn’t even certain how much time had passed between noticing the aurors’ arrival and his managing to get the words out. “The girl,” he said, instead, words coming out like a confession. “Her magic, I. I couldn’t—when she… I couldn’t…”

“She was a squib,” Quora said, cutting Harry off from his stammering. But his voice was a bit less harsh now, and to Harry’s surprise, he seemed to actually be listening to what Harry said. Even if he had cast crucio so easily—well, he had told Harry it fed off fear, more than anger.

“She could have been a muggle, or a witch, or a… It would have been the same. That curse—that curse—”

“The Crucciatus, or the Killing Curse?”

“…it, it doesn’t just kill them. It…” He shuddered, and it wasn’t just from the recurring wave of pain that the air felt like it was closing in on him again. “It does something to their magic, and… I’m not an expert on… on people dying, but…”

Suddenly Quora was on his feet, coming around the desk, and all Harry could do was shrink in on himself. He traced frantically over his last words, trying to figure out if he had said something wrong, braced himself for another crucio…

It never came.

Instead, Quora grabbed his shoulder and pushed Harry up against the back of the chair again. “Show me,” he demanded in an almost breathlessly soft voice, and his hand shifted to Harry’s chin and snapped his head back, and— leglimens— suddenly Harry was tumbling back through the last several hours.

Quora’s legilimency was… like the man himself. Subtle, where he wished to be, but more like a force of nature, uncaring for the wreckage wrought as he pursued his goal. And Harry’s mind, already as disorganized as if a hurricane had come through, provided little resistance. For a moment Harry panicked, then realized it was too late to build up his occlumency beyond the uncertain layers
that he already had, because Quora’s magic was already in his mind—
—and it felt right.

No—not right— There was nothing about this that was—

*the girl’s silent scream accompanied by her mother’s*

—nothing at all—hadn’t he already done enough—

*Bella—dispose of that*

—he couldn’t, he didn’t want to, he couldn’t make him—

*Avada Kedavra—*

Void. The void where the girl had been, and it was here in Harry’s mind, like he had apparated to outer space and was caught in the seconds before suffocation, freezing, explosion— But it was not his death, it was hers, the godless separation of magic from body—

And Quora was fascinated. He cared not that memory already distorted time; he stretched it out, leaving Harry to experience it again and again, the ends merging together and overlapping into one never-ending torment—

And then Quora was turning away from the memory, and Harry’s mind stuttered to catch up, and he scrambled again to reject the *rightness*, to recall his occlumency, wondering what else he could possibly want, how he could possibly be looking for more— He tore through memories indiscriminately, Regulus blurring with Hector blurring with his Uncle blurring with Dumbledore blurring with—

Thalia. The thestral patronus comforting Mael flickering out as Voldemort-as-Lord-Wilkes cast the Killing Curse— But she was practically dead already, and the dementors seemed to be closing in—Thalia fell back to the floor, foot catching in the gruel dish, wand rolling away—

*You left me there—you—why did you leave me?*

—the thestral patronus flickered out—and Thalia fell back to the floor—

*Don’t go! Don’t leave me again—*

—and Thalia fell back to the floor—the dementors approached—

*a distant scream—*

—and Thalia fell back to the floor—

*not Harry, please, not Harry—*

—and then the void began to crumble, like black sand made from volcanic glass, and for a moment, on every fragment Thalia fell back to the floor, empty and dead. But then the sand began to shift, and as if his memory were a brilliant light for the glass to reflect, he was surrounded by memories—and the sight of them made Harry scream—

—and Quora retreated, grabbing Harry and pulling him out too.

And they were in the office again, and Harry heard someone screaming until he realized it was him,
and cut off with a strangled gasp.

They were in the office again.

And Thalia wasn’t—and the girl wasn’t—

The blur of Quora’s face shifted, and the grip on Harry’s chin released, pulling back a few inches. There was blood on his fingers. Harry’s blood. He tasted it in his mouth, dripping down from his nose. Before Harry could catch himself, he let out a whimper, and the sound made him start, and his head, losing the strength to hold itself in the position that Quora had held it in, rolled forward, and Harry coughed, rasping for breath, as he folded in on himself.

There was a fluttering of robes before him, and Quora grabbed Harry’s head again, pushing him upright, and drew his wand across Harry’s face. There was a feeling like cotton in his nose, but the blood dried and fell away like dust, and the bleeding must have stopped because his lips stayed dry. Another flick of Quora’s wand, and Harry’s glasses drifted up off the floor, settling on his face, and Harry blinked several times, trying to get his eyes to focus, and realized he was still looking up, vulnerable—

He let his head drop, and this time Quora did not correct it.

Nor did he move.

“You are a curious sort, Mr. Harrigan,” the man said after a minute. Harry forced himself to look up, his eyes reaching no higher than the hand hovering inches from his head, still as stone. “You truly do not see magemetry as a gift.”

It was not a question, the way he phrased it, and Harry swallowed, rubbing at his arms, which felt like they were covered in bugs running across his skin. Not a question, because he had looked, and now he knew. But Harry, not wanting to risk the Cruciatus again, was to answer anyways.

“As you said, it could have just gotten me killed,” he said, trying not to mumble—but where his voice had been raspy from the *crucio* before, it was now nearly gone. “It gives me headaches. The aspirin I got from Hogsmeade... Madame Pomfrey recommended it, because she refuses to give me potions for them anymore. In case they lose effect entirely.”

“Pain is a minor setback to be overcome.”

So said the man who was trigger-happy with the Cruciatus. But... “It’s not the pain,” Harry said. “It’s the... focus. I can’t...”

“Your control is abysmal, yes.”

Quora finally turned and went back around his desk, taking his previous seat again, and took a sip of the alcohol. It seemed strange to Harry, that a man like him—a man clearly so obsessive about control—would drink, and he doubted Quora was ever drunk—

Would it help, Harry wondered, to be drunk? Hani could find him something; he could drink and drink and drink and —

“With great effort, anyone can come to sense magic,” Quora said. “But I mean *great* effort. Even for those naturally predisposed to it, learning takes years of meditative work with no certainty of an outcome, and even when it is achieved...” He eyed Harry speculatively. “It is nothing like what you see. Nowhere as defined, or broad, and even focusing on one thing at a time, never so complete. However...”
Quora folded his arms, tapping his fingers. Harry, not wanting to earn himself another Crucius, did not ask what he meant. He was more curious as to the suggestion that people could learn it—from what Harry had read about magemetry, it was never looked on as something good, more as a sentence to a slow death isolated in a small room. Of course, Quora had never seen it that way, when he looked at Harry.

Was it a Dark Arts thing? His gut twisted at the thought. Sensing something most humans weren’t able to… something unknown to most magical people…

“I will have to test this,” Quora finally announced.

Harry winced. Quora saw the action and raised an eyebrow, so then Harry had to say it—

“Please don’t go killing people around me just to…”

“You’ll get used to it,” Quora said. He paused when Harry shook his head. “You will, because killing people is a necessary part of this revolution. You may be but a schoolboy now, Mr. Harrigan, but you are an adult in the eyes of the law, and if you are incapable of learning to deal with it, you will find yourself left behind, and if I recall correctly the Dementors of Azkaban have a particularly uncomfortable effect on you. And I will be most disappointed if you get yourself arrested.”

Harry shuddered, letting his chin fall again. Three threats loaded into one: arrest, dementors, and a pissed off Dark Lord. He got the picture—and held his tongue.

“Though you may wish to restructure your occlumency before that happens,” Quora said. “You were practicing with Severus, weren’t you? I advise you to begin that again. Your mind is so filled with gaps and blocks—the result of your previous instructor’s gaes, I can only imagine—it is practically falling apart. If I were to legilimize you again right now, I don’t doubt there would be permanent damage. That or the gaes would dissolve, which, while useful to me, would also have the potential to destroy your brain.”

Harry flinched, licking his lips. Quora did not need to know that there was only one gaes in his mind: the one he’d trapped Harry in with the contract. But there was the obfuscus, and that was one thing that Harry would rather die than let Quora break through… though there was a good chance that if Quora broke it, it would kill him anyways. And if not… well, letting someone like the Dark Lord in on the future would result in life like death.

Which meant he needed to hide the book. Now more than ever. Which meant talking to Severus. Which meant—

Well, his anger at Severus was nothing compared to his fear of the Dark Lord.

-

An hour later and four hours earlier, Harry trudged up the stairs towards Ravenclaw Tower. It was still before dinner, but as he’d missed the first time around he’d gone down to the kitchens and asked for it early.

He was exhausted. Quora had given him a potion to stave off any lasting damage from the Crucius — This is why it is such a hassle to bring in Death Eaters young, he’d said—but Harry’s muscles still ached like they were fighting to peel away from his bones.
Make sure you're seen, Quora had said as he sent Harry out the door. Easy for him to say. Even, or especially, with supper in his belly, all Harry wanted to do was sleep.

Well, as long as Hector knew where he was, then probably everyone else would, too. But if he wasn’t in the dorms... Ah, what did it matter. Harry would find out soon enough.

As he approached it, the bronze eagle door-knocker that guarded Ravenclaw Tower shifted its feathers, tilting its head to one side to eye Harry speculatively. “Say my name, I disappear. You cannot see me in a mirror, yet even if the image is clear, I am more there than I am here.”

Harry squinted at the knocker, and glanced down the hall. No one around to answer it for him. He sighed, shifting his bag. “Say my name, I disappear…” he muttered, then blinked. “Oh. Silence.”

The door swung open.

“Harry!” Hector called the moment Harry set foot into the common room. Harry blinked at his roommate’s enthusiastic grin, and before he could think about it found himself following the beckons over to a table across the room. There was quite a crowd of people gathered, and Harry had to crane his neck a bit to see why: Cat Sanchez was sitting across the table from a girl Harry didn’t recognize at first. He thought she might be a seventh-year from one of the other houses, and something looked familiar about her, but he couldn’t place what, exactly. Between the two was a chess board, the pieces sprawled out in play, which the other students were watching with excitement.

“Inner-house competition,” Hector explained as Harry came to stand next to him. “Marlene’s the top player in Gryffindor, and issued a challenge to Ravenclaw. So we nominated Cat to play her.”

“Nominated?” Harry echoed, his interest sounding entirely faked even to his ears. “Is there not a, uh, reigning champion for this?”

“Well, that’s Mandy. And you can see how enthusiastic she is about this.” Mandy was sitting at the table next to Cat, her head resting in her arms and eyes fully closed. Pandora was leaning against the back of her chair, weaving Mandy’s hair into some sort of complicated braid, complete with flowers. “And then there’s Pan, but... well, some people think it’s too frustrating to play her, so she generally avoids chess.”

“She’s frustrating to play against?”

“She doesn’t follow any strategy, she only responds to what the other person does, in ways that really shouldn’t work,” cut in Barty, who was standing on Hector’s other side, his eyes fixed on the board. “And yet, somehow she always wins.”

“That, or three moves in she determines that she’s lost,” Hector said. He met Harry’s eye with a pointedly raised eyebrow. “It’s a game that relies on being able to play out several steps in advance. She’s good at it.”

“Oh,” said Harry, glancing back at the game just in time to see Cat move a piece. There was general muttering, and a few groans, but from behind Mandy Pandora smiled as she tucked the braid into itself. She looked up and met Harry’s eye, tilting her head for a moment, and then came around the table.

“Well, if McKinnon beats Sanchez, we’re making Martins play her,” Barty declared. “I will personally dump a wideye potion down her throat if that’s what it—”

“What did you say her name was?” Harry asked Hector lowly.
“What? Oh, you mean— That’s Marlene McKinnon. She’s one of the chasers for the Gryffindor quidditch team, and—”

He went on, but Harry stopped listening, feeling like the floor had dropped out from underneath him. McKinnon. McKinnon. Here she was, just sitting here, playing chess, while elsewhere in the UK the Death Eaters were—Bella was—Harry was—

He felt someone grab his elbow, and the cool, soothing touch of Pandora’s magic washed over him. “Come on, Harry,” she said. “I’ll help you with your Herbology, if you help me with Defense.”

“What?” said Hector. “Don’t you want to stick around for the rest of the game? Or do you...”

She smiled. “It’ll be a good one. You should stay and watch it. You won’t expect the way it ends.”

Hector’s eyes widened, and he grinned again. “All bets are off, huh?” he said. But his smile faltered as he saw Harry’s face.

“Oy,” said one of Barty’s friends. “You’re can’t back out of a bet now, Hector!”

“That’s not what I—”

But then Marlene made her move, and all the conversations paused to watch what she was doing, and Pandora pulled Harry away.

He was shaking before they made it to the dormitory, and Pandora directed him forward and sat him on the end of the bed, and pulled up the quilt around him, and then she sat beside him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

“I—” Harry said. “She— She—”

“I know,” Pandora murmured.

“I couldn’t— I couldn’t have—”

“I know,” Pandora repeated. “I know.”

Whatever words Harry was trying to form were pushed aside as he bent his head and sobbed.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, Harry.
"Is it done, then?"

Harry turned the book over in his hands. It had been three weeks of trying to find time in between everything else that was going on, of overcoming the tension that was still running high between him and Severus, of forcing himself not to let every moment fall to despair, but this was it: the final product of all their research, craft, and casting.

He set down the book, and picked up its twin from the table. He pushed past the feeling that it was much less interesting, despite being identical in every visible way—that was the spells at work. The first book did not need that sort of deceptive magic soaked into the cover; it was going to be handed to the professors, so there was no point. But this book was going to be tucked away in the recesses of the library, and was so layered with charms that if someone did not know where it was to begin with, there was very little chance they would even register it on the shelves. This book was the more important of the pair. Inside, transfigured into ordinary pages indistinguishable from the rest and layered behind a slightly different set of charms than the first, were the words that each of them had written, serving as the keys to the obfuscus spells sealing the memories from Harry's future-past. This book was the most important secret Harry thought either of them needed to keep, as it was the secret that kept others concealed.

"It's done," Harry agreed. He looked up, meeting Severus's eyes across the table. The other boy looked satisfied, though Harry knew that his feelings on the obfuscus were conflicted, to say the least. If nothing else, Severus valued the actual act of crafting magic enough that he had grown more invested in the project as time went on. "We need to hide this."

"Do you have a spot?"

Harry nodded, and slipped out of the bench of the table. It wasn't their usual table, but the one he'd found tucked away in the dusty back corner, where no other students were likely to go and Madame Pince less likely to kick them out for doing too much magic in the presence of her books. "What do you think," he asked, lowering his voice as he passed outside of the muffliato ward Severus had cast for them. "In the section on mind magics? That'll make it easy enough to remember."

"You don't think that's too obvious?"

Harry shook his head, ignoring the way it ached—it wasn't the obfuscus hurting him. "Either someone's going to know where to look, or they're not," he said. "And I doubt anyone would go looking for it here, if they don't know the place."

'Here' being among the final papers of the thousands of students who had passed through Hogwarts and taken their NEWTs. As far as Harry could tell, the only ones who ever came looking were other NEWT students, checking to make sure they weren't overlapping too obviously with something already covered or trying to make use of other peoples' bibliographies. The mind magic section, on the second shelf from the bottom directly next to the table they'd been using, was particularly dust-coated.
"Might as well, then," said Severus. He crouched down beside the shelf, pulling one of the books, a journal stamped only with 'NEWT' in bronze on the front, and flipped through it. "Have you checked these over for anything useful about occlumency? Your book is the only one I've seen."

"If you find one, don't check it out," Harry advised as he slotted their book in place, third in. It didn't have NEWT stamped on it, but you couldn't see that just looking at the shelves. "If you do, maybe Madame Pince will come over here to shelve it by hand, and notice something out of place."

"Not like she ever does. We've been back here for the last two weeks, and—"

"It's better to be cautious." Harry stood up, and waved his wand to summon the time in smokey green digits floating in front of him. Just past six—he batted the numbers away. "I'm going to have the professors test it tonight, if I can," he told Severus. "Get it done with. There's an all-staff meeting. Do you want to come along?"

Severus grunted and shook his head, not looking up from the book.

"What about dinner? Do you want to come down to that?"

Another grunt. Harry sighed, pressing the joints of his thumbs into the tender skin beneath his eyes. Severus had his head in a book now, so there was no hope of dragging him along to bear with the potential embarrassment.

"Well, I'll tell Flitwick, so you'll get your extra credit out of it," Harry said. He didn’t want to give Severus anything more to hang over his head. It had taken all his restraint to work with him on finishing the books. "If you realize that book's not as interesting as having Professors trying to undo all the work we've done, you're welcome to come down to the staff room."

Severus finally tore his eyes away from the page, squinting up at Harry. "Yes, tell Flitwick," he said. "And make sure Quora knows, too. It couldn't hurt to get extra credit there, too."

Harry stared back at him for a moment, impatience dwindling somewhat at the reminder. He’d been ignoring that Quora was going to be helping Flitwick out, and the reminder that he would be there made him even less eager to go. "You sure you don't want to come?"

"Don't nag, Harrigan," Severus said, and he straightened up, moving back into the table, behind the muffliato.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Your loss," he grumbled, and turned to walk away, refusing to acknowledge the gnawing jealousy that Severus could make that sort of choice.

Maybe Flitwick wouldn’t have time tonight, so he wouldn’t have to deal with Quora until the meeting… of course, he wanted to get this over with, and if they did it before the meeting, at least he would know exactly how long he’d have to bear with Quora’s attention, but…

He ducked his head into the staff room on his way past, but it was still empty except for one of the professors he didn't know, her head bent over a book and a mug of tea steaming on one of the tables, so he quickly went on his way. With the null ward, he supposed it didn’t matter so much, going into the Great Hall at supper time. He still avoided it; it was the most energetic and crowded meal of the day, full of people he couldn't bear to look at, even at six when several of the students were missing for quidditch or club meetings, and today all the Professors were in attendance. For now, resigned to getting this over with, Harry tried to pretend the students who were there weren't (and tried to pretend some students who weren't were), composing his face and blinking his eyes several times before coming in through the side door behind where Slughorn sat and making his way around the
table so he stood across from Flitwick. He had to wait for the Professor to end his conversation with McGonagall, ignoring the looks he was getting from the dour divination professor between Flitwick and Notaro.

After a minute, however, McGonagall paused and nodded her head towards Harry, making Flitwick pause his enthusiastic explanation of a recent article and looking up. "Oh! Mr. Harrigan, good evening," he said cheerfully.

"Good evening, Professor."

"Did you need something?"

"Well, I was wondering if you might have a bit of time before the meeting, sir," he said. His voice he kept constrained, aware of the dark circles under his eyes he hadn't had time to disguise and that if he sounded too chipper it would be obvious. "Only, we've finished the project, see, um... that we talked about over the winter holiday?"

It felt like it had been nearly a lifetime ago—only two months had passed, and yet...

"Oh-ho! Splendid!" The professor nearly jumped out of his seat. "Yes—yes, of course, Mr. Harrigan—what time is it, would you say?"

"Maybe six-thirty, sir," Harry replied. "Six-fifteen?"

"Yes, there's enough time—just give me a few minutes, and get yourself a bite to eat—Oh, and—Timothy!" Flitwick leaned forward as far as he could, and Harry followed his gaze down the table past McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Sprout to where Quora sat. "We've a wager to complete?"

"A wager, Filius?" the man echoed, raising an eyebrow and glancing at Harry. Their eyes met just long enough for a chill to run up Harry's spine, and memories of a muggleborn’s family, last week—

He pushed it aside, and looked back to Flitwick. Probably not before Quora read the memory out of his eyes, because Harry could hear the smile in his voice: "Oh, yes, the... enchanting."

"Let's finish up quickly, hm? Always interesting to see what students can provide!"

"I'll come along too, I think," said Notaro, from the other direction. She smiled warmly as Harry turned and met her eyes. "I've been looking forward to seeing this, after all the odd questions you and Mr. Snape have been bringing me, and how hard you have been working."

Harry felt his ears flush, especially as Slughorn looked on with interest—though less interest than he had in the large slice of ham on his plate. "You mean Severus, from my house?"

"He's been helping me, sir," Harry said. "But you know Severus; doesn't really care for a fuss... Though really he's as much a part of it as me..." He glanced at Flitwick, hoping he got his point across.

Flitwick grinned, with a certain glint in his eye that might have been terrifying had it come from anyone other than the overwhelmingly lovable head of Ravenclaw. "Yes, well, perhaps he is unwilling to see the masters take on the students,” the professor challenged. “We shall see, Mr. Harrigan; we shall see. Shall we convene in the staff room on the hour?"

Harry thought about it for a moment, then landed on a smile. This was Flitwick; no sense in being too serious. "You sure you want to be pressing yourself for time, sir? Cutting it awfully close to the line."
Flitwick laughed. “A quarter ‘til, then. Be careful what you eat; the nerves might get to you.”

Harry smiled, and turned back towards the tables. Some of the Ravenclaw second-years witches were sitting at the close end, staring at him, so he sat down beside them, practically falling into the seat, making them jump. Besides, with the second-years, he could easily slip into the mask of confidence he’d learned to bring to class with him, layering it on over his exhaustion and the presence of Quora just meters away. They could be uncannily perceptive at times, but were, for the most part, easier to fool with smiles and bright voices. “You all ready for your test next week?”

They let out a collective groan. “That’s just mean, Mr. Harrigan,” one of them said. Harry winced.

“Please just call me Harry, Aarathi,” he told her. “We are all Ravenclaws, aren’t we? You’re making me feel old.”

“But you’re a teacher,” one of the other girls said, looking flabbergasted. “That would be like… like calling Professor Flitwick ‘Filius’!”

“Or Professor Dumbledore ‘Albus’!”

“Yeah!”

Harry laughed, snagging a roll off the platter in front of them. “Well, glad to know you put me on par with Professor Dumbledore,” he teased. “But I’m not actually a teacher, you know. Just an assistant.”

“You do a lot of the teaching,” Aarathi challenged.

“But you wouldn’t call me ‘sir’, would you?” he asked, though he shook his head before they could reply. “Please don’t say yes. If I ever catch any of you calling me ‘sir’, I’ll… take five points.”

The witches giggled. “But you’re a Ravenclaw too,” said Eunice Lee, who was the younger sister of Jaqueline, one of the other girls in Harry’s year. "It would be self-defeating."

"Oh, it would, wouldn't it," Harry said. "Then... I'll just have to give you detention! We'll say a hundred lines each, and you'll write: 'his name is Harry, and he's not a sir'. What do you say?"

"You can't give us detention for something we haven't done yet," Aarathi replied.

"Let's keep it that way, hm?" Harry pointed out. "Pass me a leg of chicken, would you, Eunice? I should be able to scarf that down..."

And he did, to the mixed horror and delight of the girls, though since he hadn't wanted to use a plate and risk setting it down before he finished and not picking it up again he had to banish the bone and clean his fingers on the corner of a napkin. It left him with just enough time to take a sip of pumpkin juice before he spotted Flitwick gesturing to Notaro and Quora, and Harry jumped up out of his seat, eager to get out of the hall. Even with the null ward, dinner was loud, and there were way too many people there to be comfortable.

And between Eunice and Aarathi sat little Catherine Pfeiffer, the daughter of an Auror who had been reported missing last week. An Auror Harry had last seen—


About half of the professors ended up leaving together, which made for a bit of jostling as they arrived at the staff room, and Harry's fingers were twitching with impatience as the divination
professor huffed over the arrangement of their seats. But after a few minutes Flitwick and Quora had managed to pull away from the social hubbub, and Harry pulled the book out of his bag, setting it on a table Flitwick conjured for them.

"The point of all the chained protections is to disguise the information contained inside," he said. "I guess the challenge is for you to be able to read it and uncover the, uh, important secret, but you have to get there, first."

"Interesting," said Flitwick, delighted with the game, and he looked over to Quora. "Would you like to take the first stab at it, Timothy?"

"Oh, you go ahead, Filius," the man drawled. "I recall that you were most enthusiastic."

"Indeed, indeed. Well, then—" And Flitwick drew out his wand.

What followed was a demonstration of why the two professors were considered masters where Harry was only a student. Between Severus and him, the pair had chained together thirty-six enchantments. For each layer, the professors had to identify the spells and disarm them without destroying the book. Several would have lit the book on fire had they did the wrong thing, which would have been disappointing had it actually happened. It took a good half hour for the professors to get through the first twenty-four enchantments, at which point it was actually possible to open the book, as the cover and pages had been sealed shut by a rune until then, but actually opening it triggered another rune that returned all the previous enchantments into place—a piece of runes work that made Professor Notaro laugh, as she'd been trying to figure out what Harry and Severus were doing with that when they had approached her with constant questions for the past two weeks.

As they set about taking them off again, Harry realized that there was quite an audience. The staff meeting wasn't until seven thirty, and it had just passed seven, but most of the professors and several of the prefects had arrived and began to settle into seats around the room, including Dumbledore, who was seated with McGonagall and sipping tea from a fluorescent orange and yellow mug. Cat Sanchez seemed to have dragged Hector in with her, as the pair was seated near Professor Sprout and the other boy looked rather put out, but he waved at Harry from across the room.

Harry swallowed and turned back slowly, pretending he hadn't seen. The two professors had managed to get the cover open again, but the pages were sealed together. One of them had cast a charm that seemed to map out the way the enchantments were wrapped around the pages, and Quora had his arms crossed over his chest, frowning down at it.

"There's Ionus Iuniper's trio," Flitwick mused, waving his hand over the spell to indicate three golden spells that were worked together. "Which if I recall correctly—what did you call it, Clarke?"

She leaned closer, and drew out her wand, modifying the spell slightly, so that the colors had changed. "Ah, a Bazman combination," she said, and she shot Harry a look. "Not something I would normally recommend anyone but a master to cast without supervision, Mr. Harrigan."

"He seems to have lived through it," Quora said dismissively. "If I recall correctly, Bazman combinations are instances of runic warding, rather than wand casting. And they usually consist of a fourth component." He glanced up at Harry, a curious look in his eye that set Harry immediately on edge. It was the same sort of look he'd had after he legitimimized Harry, intent on seeing death through Harry's perception, though less like he was going to find another person to murder than that entailed, thankfully—or maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was something else, and Harry's mind just went that way because of long nights with that look haunting his scant sleep—there hadn't been any deaths he'd been forced to witness, since, but his mind had plenty of fodder from—
Harry swallowed, trying to project cool confidence that he was most definitely not feeling.

Maybe he could snag enough dreamless sleep to get him a full eight hours, now that the book was finished. That would at least be enough to start repairing the growing cracks in his occlumency.

"What was it on that list you gave me?" Flitwick asked, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Strange, but I just can’t seem to put my mind on it…"

Quora raised an eyebrow, looking back down at the book. He began to wave his wand, clearing away some of the threads until what remained were the three Flitwick had indicated previously and three others, bound to the spine. "Perhaps we should deal with those next," he said, and Flitwick look surprised, but shrugged.

Harry did his best to contain a sigh, as it would have been more amusing if they had tried to dismantle the combination without going through the proper steps—the enchantments would have reset again, only in a different order—and then nearly jumped a foot when something unexpected appeared in the corner of his vision. Regulus laughed lightly, patting Harry’s arm.

"Sorry, Harry; I didn’t mean to startle you," he said, and tilted his head down towards the book. "Is this what you and Severus have been working on so intently? The final product?"

Harry nodded stiffly, raising the urge to tug away from the hand now resting on his elbow. Regulus had noticed them working together in the library and asked about it, before they had the sense to move to the back corner. They’d referred to the other book as the ‘practice’ copy, to avoid drawing too much attention to it.

Or Severus had. It was still difficult for Harry to even speak to Regulus. It was uncomfortable being angry with Regulus in a way it wasn’t with Severus. He couldn’t just forget what Regulus had chosen; however…

"Ah-hah!" Flitwick exclaimed as the enchantments on the spine were severed. He waved his wand, and the cover disconnected from the book—across the room, Madame Pince visibly flinched. But when he turned the dismantled book so the spine stood upright, Flitwick’s triumph faded, and he frowned.

"Very clever, Mr. Harrigan," said Quora, without any apparent delight. "The fourth component to the spell is a perception charm, isn’t it?"

"Oh!" Flitwick exclaimed. "Yes, that’s what it was. Must be quite a powerful one, for the idea to slip my mind entirely, hm?"

"If you say so, sir," Harry said. Beside him, Regulus let out a quiet laugh. His hand was still resting on Harry’s elbow.

"Now, don’t you let it get to your head… let’s see…"

Flitwick ran his fingers down the sewn binding of the book, tracing the thread. About two thirds of the way down he paused, and gestured to to Quora. “Here, would you say, Tim?”

Quora traced a finger along the spine as well, feeling the spot Flitwick had found. There didn’t appear to be anything there, but… "A rune, yes. If I’m not mistaken… peorð? Not a common choice. Nor one I am terribly familiar with."

"It has been used as a symbol of puzzles or riddles," Notaro offered, from where she sat, closer to the door. “Remember, Mr. Harrigan has experience in translating coded works. A certain branch of
wizards would use *peorð* to deliberately indicate that a sentence contained more information than what could easily be seen.”

“**Apt,**” Quora said. Then he tapped the spot with his wand, and as a precisely controlled burst of magic snipped through the thread, it was revealed, and Harry saw several of those watching blink in surprise as the perception charm was released. “Filius, you said the rest of it was a combination you recognized?”

“Yes; Ionus Jupiter’s trio. One of the best for sealing something up tight, but since that rune was the keystone, we should be able to…” He trailed off, and did something with his wand that made the hair on Harry’s arms stand up, even with the null ward. A complicated bit of magic. Probably more complicated than the trio itself had been. His spell broke nearly through the three enchantments, and the book shifted, the pages becoming loose. Flitwick cast another diagnostic spell before, satisfied, opened the first page, and—

“**Very nice, Mr. Harrigan,**” Notaro complemented, spying the rest of the runework. “I’d wondered about your recent experiments into multimedia.”

“It was Severus who thought of writing it on the inside, so you couldn’t actually see the spell,” Harry said quickly. “We needed a way to seal it from the outside, though, without being too noticeable, or the perception spell wouldn’t work. The binding seemed the safest bet.”

“Indeed,” said Quora, and he flipped to the next page. Then he blinked, and looked up to Harry in confusion, and back down again. “‘A Bear Called… Paddington?’ he read.

Behind him, Harry heard someone stifle a giggle. “I know that book!” he heard Lily say—she must have just come in. “It’s a muggle children's book. We read it in school. I was always expecting bears to turn up at the train station when we went to London, after that.”

Quora’s expression shifted from confusion to something like contempt. “Well, of course I haven’t heard of it, then.” He flipped the pages. “And is this story your hidden secret, Mr. Harrigan?”

“No, no,” said Flitwick. He cast his spell again, and though the threads from the previous spells were gone, there were still some complicated tangles. “This is still covered in magic. A diversion, isn’t it?”

Harry dipped his head.

“Well, you have about three minutes to be diverted, Professors,” Dumbledore called from behind him. “We do have a meeting to get to, after all.”

Harry tried not to jump—though Regulus must have felt him grow tense, as he gave Harry’s arm the slightest squeeze. And then he let go. *Finally.*

“Of course, of course,” said Flitwick, sounding somewhat impatient. Harry supposed solving this was more interesting than sitting through another staff meeting. “Do you recognize these patterns, Tim?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“Clarke? A hint?”

Professor Notaro raised her hands. “This isn’t runes work, Filius,” she said. “If you don’t recognize it, I don’t know what to say.”

Flitwick frowned and batted away the threads. He tried another spell, which made the whole book
shine blue, and then another, which did even less. “Any ideas, Tim?”

“I’m sure I could find something in my books, but it appears we do not have the time.”

“Very well,” said Flitwick. He looked up at Harry. “I think you’ve more than demonstrated your skills—and Mr. Snape’s, yes. But I don’t think I can give you any extra credit unless you show us how it is resolved. The curiosity is killing me.”

“You’re... conceding, Professor?” Harry asked in surprise.

“Don’t let it go to your head, Mr. Harrigan,” Quora drawled, and the surprise vanished under caution. “I, too, would like a demonstration of the rest, hm?”

“Alright,” said Harry. “Um, well… first you have to re-attach the cover, or the rest of this won’t work, so…” He stepped forward, away from Regulus, grabbing the cover and folding it over the pages, and cast a quick *reparo* to seal the pieces together. “And then,” he said, flipping it open again to reveal the pages, “there’s the spell to redistribute the ink…” He demonstrated, and the pages re-wrote themselves. Harry could see several people watching in fascination as it redistributed itself from letters into runes. “And then, well…”

He pushed the book towards them. Quora frowned, bending over it, and began to scan the text—but he stopped fairly quickly. “Clarke, I think this is up to you,” he said. “That’s not a standard bit of translation.”

Notaro picked up the book, and looked down at the page. After a moment, the furrow between her brows deepened, but then she laughed. “Albus,” she said, walking over to show Dumbledore the pages.

The same shift of expressions seemed to cross his face, and then he looked up, a humorous twinkle in his eye. “You continue to demonstrate your ingenuity, Mr. Harrigan,” he said.

“Well?” Flitwick asked. “What does it say?”

“I haven’t the slightest,” said Notaro, taking the book and setting it on the table between them. “Well, I might be able to tell you, if you gave me a few months. This is why Mr. Harrigan has a job with the OMRL, gentlemen. Harry, you’re going to have to…”

“It’s an adaption of a fairly common double-coding system used in journals from, uh, well, the late seventeen hundreds through the fifties,” Harry explained, ignoring the strange looks he got from the other students. The ones who hadn’t placed him as a Ravenclaw before surely had now. “It’s fairly straightforward once you’ve got it memorized, except there are some sticky spots in moving between alphabets… but once you had translated it all, you’d find a coded version of *Paddington*, only there would be, um, errors. Clues, essentially, leading to the password, which, then…” He cleared his throat slightly, and set the tip of his wand on the page. “*Revelus* Platform Nine and Three Quarters.”

The ink shifted again, only this time, it collected together where the tip of his wand rested, and only when it was all gathered inky letters seeped out from the spot. “The puzzle is solved,” Flitwick read, and he beamed up at Harry in delight, and Harry couldn’t keep himself from beaming back, mirroring such genuine emotions. “Wonderful, Mr. Harrigan! Simply marvelous. Truly a work of artistry…”

“Adept though he may be at the narrow fields of magic he bothers directing his attention to,” Quora begins, drawling the words out in such a way that they were more insult than anything, “I doubt the boy wants praise, Filius, so much as he wants points.”
“Oh, of course—Albus, I am biased, of course; what would you say is fair?”

The headmaster hummed. “I would say fifty points to Ravenclaw would be a start, though I am sure you have extra credit in mind.”

“And to Slytherin,” Harry said quickly. “Severus was as much a part of this as I was, even if he’s not here.”

“Twenty points to Slytherin is fair, I think,” said Quora. “After all, Mr. Harrigan, it was you who took the lead on this project.”

Harry looked somewhere in the vicinity of Quora’s shoulder, giving a forced shrug. He might have argued, but he figured he could just find excuses to give the Slytherin second and third years points in class. Well, Severus probably wouldn’t care, anyways, so long as he got the extra credit.

“Exciting as this has been, I think it is about time to begin our meeting,” Dumbledore said. “If you would find your seats, Mr. Harrigan, Mr. Black, Professors…?”

Quora beckoned for Harry to come sit next to him, but there was only a pair of seat where he gestured, so Regulus shot Harry and apologetic glance before taking the seat beside Primrose Greengrass instead. Professor Sprout beamed as Harry took the seat next to her, patting him encouragingly on the arm, missing the way he stiffened, but Dumbledore seemed to be in a serious mood, standing from his seat to address the crowded room.

“Now, the reason we have called everyone together is that, in light of recent events, the Board of Governors and the Ministry have encouraged us to implement new security measures to keep our students safe and grounds secure,” Dumbledore began. "We have all heard about the increases in violent acts around the country, and until the perpetrators are identified and apprehended, we cannot risk Hogwarts becoming a target."

No wonder he looked so solemn. The flutter of confidence from the success of the book twisted into a squirming darkness. If the Ministry thought Voldemort would attack here... well, with Quora on the grounds and maintaining his cover, it wasn't that likely... was it? Was taking Hogwarts his real—

No. No, it couldn't be. It couldn’t.

"First and foremost: Prefects. You are closer to your fellow students than us teachers can ever be. As such, we are relying on you to keep an eye on each other. If you have ample reason to believe that any of your peers have been contacted by the 'Death Eaters' or Lord Voldemort, please, discuss matters with your Head of House."

He spoke the name casually, and while a few eyes went wide, it was only Harry and Regulus who stiffened, trying not to let their hands fly to their arms on which, at the utterance, the Dark Mark burned. Had it always done that? Harry wondered, but he couldn't recall anyone else saying the name directly... He glanced towards Quora from the corner of his eye, but the man simply looked uncaring and bored.

Dumbledore sighed before continuing. "As you all know, it has long been a tenant of Hogwarts that students and staff feel a right to hold and express their own political beliefs, regardless of any policies the Ministry might pass or the political situation beyond our walls. However, these Death Eaters are not a political movement, but an extremist terrorist group, and their beliefs are firmly opposite against what we practice here at Hogwarts, which includes an equal right to education, safety, and happiness regardless of personal background. There have also been reports of the Death Eaters recruiting and training child soldiers—" Several of the Professors gasped in horror, as this was news not reported,
even after the manor, but Dumbledore went on. "—and therefore it is of paramount importance that we know of any contact at all, to protect not only our muggleborn students, but also those who might fall victim to theses schemes. Professor?"

Well, Harry thought dully as Professor Kettleburn, the Care of Magical Creatures professor and Deputy Headmaster, pushed himself up onto his wooden legs, waving his one hand (which was missing more fingers than not) to get the murmuring to quiet, at least this would assure Quora that Harry hadn't found a way to go behind his back to Dumbledore, since he already went a pretty dramatic route to stop that. Still… There Dumbledore was an ember of resentment burning in his gut that he couldn't quite stifle. Too late, wasn't it? Severus and Regulus had been marked weeks ago—Harry could have slipped some hints to Hector if Dumbledore had… If only Dumbledore had acted sooner, Harry could have…

Of course, while Quora said he intended to uphold his side of the contract, he'd already proven he had means to get around it. So even if Dumbledore was late... Harry didn't want Severus and Regulus to be punished for what they'd done, but maybe... maybe there was a chance that it would help.

Harry wasn’t finding much hope in chances, these days.

"So," Kettleburn said, his voice coming out raspy. "In addition to the increases to the school wards being added over the next several months, there will be aurors on the premises, inspecting the school for potentially dangerous areas if we were to be attacked, and developing evacuation plans—I know, I know, don't get yer knickers in a twist. They're going to be working at night, after hours, so there shouldn't be any interference with classes. That bein' said, if any of 'em bother you 'bout anything, just come to me or Albus, an' we'll set 'em straight."

"What Silvanus means to say is that your rights remain secure," Dumbledore added. "The aurors will only be here to develop emergency guidelines."

"For how long?" Harry heard Binns whisper angrily to Flitwick, who shushed him but looked equally annoyed.

"Right," said Kettleburn. "Now, until then, we've decided that we're going to have to restrict Hogsmeade access. For now, we're saying any student seventeen or older can take one of the younger years with them, providing they stick together, an' assuming they've gotten permission from their parents. We've sent out a secondary release form—QUIET!" The fifth-year prefects, who had quickly realized that the rule meant even they wouldn't get to go down to the village, bit their tongues on their complaints, faced with Kettleburn's gnarled visage. "Yes, this includes you, prefects. An' nobody will be going down in the village alone. Everyone's got to have at least one other Hogwarts student with them at all times, even just walking back to the castle."

"But sir," one of the fifth year Gryffindor prefects argued, "If we're old enough to be prefects, surely we're old enough—"

"Ye' can't cast spells off Hogwarts grounds, Park, so if you run into trouble, what are you going to do? Assign detention?"

Dumbledore cut in again, his calm demeanor contrasting sharply with the professor's sarcasm. “As Professor Kettleburn has said, we are not completely cutting off access to the village. It is simply more important that all younger students who are not able to legally use their wands outside of the grounds stay safe. And yes, I can see some of you itching to ask: we will be restricting all leaving the grounds for holidays to those whose parents can arrange a personal pick-up and follow the proper procedure for a one-day excusal.”
His amendments did little to ease the obvious upset of the fifth years—and, Harry noticed, a few of the sixth years, who probably hadn’t had their seventeenth birthdays yet. Harry had only been down to the village a handful of times, and since every butterbeer, quill, and pack of aspirin was a major cut out of his minimal savings, he couldn’t bring himself to be too upset in regards to the village. He was mainly curious as to how Quora would deal with the new restrictions. Would they hold him back from dragging Harry off to kill squibs and muggles—

He swallowed, looking down at his hands. He didn’t want to think of that here. It seemed… sacrilege, in this bastion. Let alone dangerous, to have it in the staff room.

Kettleburn called for attention again, waving his one arm in the air and shouting louder than was strictly necessary in the small staff room, and began discussing something about patrols, which Harry, not a part of that duty, tuned out. He watched Quora out of the corner of his eye instead, and found the defense professor’s assumed expression to be one of pure boredom. Whatever the man underneath felt about the fuss, watching him, his finger tapping on the arm of the wooden chair he occupied like a throne, Harry doubted he was altogether concerned. And why should he be? Voldemort was leading a violent revolution against the state; if Quora was really concerned by a few minor security changes at Hogwarts, Harry would be seriously concerned about his priorities.

Unless Hogwarts was a priority. If Hogwarts really was a target… damn it, why hadn’t Harry made that a stipulation in his contract? Maybe he could have—not that the contract was worth anything, but—

He was still berating himself when the meeting came to a close, having once again missed almost all of it. He only really noticed it was over when Quora stood up and swept out of the room.

After a moment staring at the door, he slumped in relief. He hadn’t even noticed, but he’d been steeling himself to be pulled out of the meeting and into something horrific, or maybe a lecture about wasting his time with the book project when he should be focusing on learning apparition or studying any of the books Quora’d gone out of his way to mention—but it seemed Quora had no such plans in mind. At least not for today.

Around him, the prefects and professors had fallen into urgent conversations, but Harry was left to himself. Well, it wasn’t as though Harry’d wanted to be included in the ‘staff’ to begin with. He stood up, stretched, and was considering what he wanted to do with his Friday night, now that they’d finished the book project—his mind drifted back to the thought of knicking some Dreamless Sleep, and stealing a few hours of sleep, just enough to keep his brain functioning right—but before he could decide…

“Harrigan,” said Remus Lupin, squeezing past Professor Slughorn to get over to him. “I was wondering if it would be possible to ask you a few questions about a… ah, a project we’ve been working on.”

Harry blinked at him. He’d never had much conversation with Remus, and with him being a friend of Sirius, he fell firmly in the category of headache material—both because Sirius was likely to bite his head off if he Harry had spoken to Remus and because of the obfuscus. And because he was, of course, a werewolf. That didn’t mean much to Harry, outside of a certain need for caution if he had reason to be out and about on the night of the full moon, but it did make him somewhat wary of the mild-mannered Gryffindor. If he was keeping so huge a secret as an alter ego as a violent, man-eating wolf, then what other things could he be hiding?

Of course, Harry couldn’t judge anyone for keeping secrets. Still… It did make him think twice about what Remus had said.
And after he thought twice about it, and watched as over Remus's shoulder Madame Pomfrey bustled out the door, he replied, quite eloquently, “Huh?”

“Er,” said Remus, glancing around. “Where are you headed? The others are up in the library; I could walk with you, explain where it’s not so, um, loud.”

Harry frowned. The library? Well, it was a good a place as any other, he supposed, and Severus would probably still be reading if he wanted an excuse to get away. “Alright, I guess,” he said, and stood, picking up his bag. He’d left the book with Flitwick, who was currently in an animated conversation with Professor Savant, so he figured there was nothing for him to stick around her for.

Remus led the way out into the hall, but waited until they were out of earshot of the staff room before he started talking again. “That was really impressive, the magic you did on that book,” he said.

“Me and Severus,” Harry corrected. It wouldn’t hurt to remind the Gryffindor who he was dealing with, if he wanted something from Harry. Even if he and Severus weren’t friends, per say, they had an alliance of sorts, when it came to Sirius.

Not that there’d been a word between Harry and Sirius for weeks, now—Severus didn’t like any of the Gryffindors except Lily, and none of them liked him, so the point remained.

“Yes, well. I wouldn’t exactly expect him to help me with anything.”

Harry stiffened—there was any number of ways that could be insulting—but when he glanced over Remus looked rueful, not spiteful. Harry contained a sigh; he’d been spending too much time around Slytherins. Gryffindors didn’t insult people they were trying to ask for help, if only because they’d only ask for help from people they didn’t feel the need to insult. Maybe that was why he’d given in so easily.

“What is this ‘project’ you need help with?” he asked. “I don’t recall there being anything big for class at the moment…”

“Oh, it’s not for class. It’s a rather involved bit of enchanting. The four of us have been working on it all year. It’s… well, it would probably be best just to show you, to be honest,” he said, laughing slightly. “But what you did with the ink, and the password on that book? That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to figure out for the last two months. Even if you don’t want to share exactly how you did it, if you could point me to some books…”

“You want to put a password that manipulates the ink on a page,” Harry clarified. Remus wasn’t very good at getting to the point, it seemed.


He asked the question seriously, pausing in front of the library door and turning to face Harry as he did. Harry stared back. Remus was… odder than he had expected. “I thought that’s what we were coming here for…?”

“Er, yes, I just—” He glanced around, stepping closer and lowering his voice somewhat. “I just mean, it’s sort of a secret, between the four of us, and while I’d understand if you were just coming along with me to try and get some blackmail on Sirius, I’d really, well…”

“Appreciate it if I didn’t?” Harry finished. Okay. Odder than expected, but not completely lacking in common sense. “I won’t tell anyone, provided it isn’t dangerous, whatever it is, and you’re not making it for the sake of bullying kids because they looked at you funny. I don’t exactly enjoy messing with other peoples’ lives.”
Remus stared at him. “If—you don’t want to—I’m not going to force you to…”

Harry snorted. Remus Lupin, force him to do anything? From what Harry had seen of the boy, he had to have permission to even breath. “Just show me, would you?”

Remus nodded, and turned to open the door to the library.

Sirius, James, and Pettigrew were sitting at what to them would seem a conveniently placed table, hidden just out of sight of Madame Pince’s hawkish glare, while still able to keep watch over the main sitting area. Harry and Severus’s usual table, on the other hand, was in sight of Madame Pince’s desk, but little else. It didn’t stop him from looking over as they went past the desk, but Severus was bent over a book. Perhaps he had found something worth reading.

“What’s he doing here?” Pettigrew whined before Remus had even reached the table, his beady eyes fixed on Harry.

“Harrigan may have the solution to our problem,” Remus said, pausing to glance around and lean in, “with the map.”

A map? A map of what? Something was nagging in the back of his mind, but what?

“You told him?” James hissed, at the exact same time as Pettigrew said, quite loudly, “You told him?”

And then the pang of a headache—

Oh, for Merlin’s sake. How had he gotten himself into this?

The others quickly shushed Pettigrew, and Harry rolled his eyes. He pulled out his wand, intent on casting a *muffliato* before Sirius inevitably joined in the shouting and got Harry kicked out of the library, but before he could Pettigrew had jumped to his feet, grabbing for his own wand. Sirius’s hand darted to his own, and his eyes narrowed, trained on Harry’s wand—but at least he had an excuse. The last time they’d been in contact Harry had—well, all he’d actually done was disarm him, but he had told Sirius he would fight…

“For God’s sake,” Harry growled. His headache was getting worse—whether from the obfuscus, or because he was so bloody tired. “I’m not so stupid that I’m going to hex you. Least of all in the middle of the library.”

“Put that away, Peter,” said James quietly, though he, too, was staring at Harry’s wand.

“May I?” Harry said.

“May you what?”

“Cast a privacy ward without getting jumped.”

James’ eyes flicked to Sirius, but Remus quickly responded: “Of course.”

Harry raised his wand a bit higher, keeping his movements slow and deliberate as he turned. “*Muffliato,*” he muttered, hoping they missed the incantation. He wasn’t as good at it as Severus was, but it settled into place, and Harry turned around again, making a show of putting his wand back into his pocket, leaving the handle sticking out a bit higher than he usually would. “Now would you show me the damn thing?”
“Why should we?” Pettigrew snapped.

“Because I think he can help us,” Remus said. He slid into the bench next to Pettigrew, then seemed to realize there was no space for Harry. “Uh, James, could you…?”

James nodded, looked around the table, and whipped his wand out without any of the consideration Harry had just provided. Harry managed to keep his hand off his wand as a spare bit of parchment was transfigured into a chair, and swallowed his misgivings and sat on the thing when it was offered to him.

He did sit on it rather gingerly, though, because even if James had been less of a prat this year, Harry wouldn’t put it past any of them to conjure a chair that would break under his weight.

“It’s our secret,” said Pettigrew. “And there’s no way someone like him could—”

“Could we please just get to the point?” Harry said. “Either I can help you or I can’t, but that will depend on—”

“What did you promise him?” Pettigrew demanded. “Remus, he’s—”

“Shut up, Peter,” Sirius muttered.

There was silence for a moment, and then Harry finished, “it will depend on the object itself, which you still haven’t shown me.”

“Right,” said Remus. “James, do you still have—”

“But he’s a Death Eater!” Pettigrew cried.

The silence returned. It took Pettigrew a moment to realize that it wasn’t just Harry who was glaring at him.

“What the fuck, Peter,” said James finally.

“But he’s—”

“You really are one of the rudest people I’ve ever met,” Harry said flatly. He glanced at Remus. “Look, I said I would take a look at it, but if I’m just here to have baseless insults and accusations thrown at me, then you can do that without me here.”

“No!” Remus said forcefully, grabbing for Harry’s arm. Harry snatched it back, and Remus turned bright red. “No, I’m—I’m sorry, Harrigan; Peter’s just—James, could you please just—”

“But he’s—”

Harry jumped up the moment he felt Sirius’s magic rise, but when the hex came it was directed at Peter, not him. Peter let out a sound like a toad croak, and, having recognized the spell, sent a confused glare towards Sirius. But Sirius just tucked his wand away, saying nothing.

“Right,” said James, and he reached into the pocket of his robe, pulling out a scrap of parchment folded several times over itself, and set it on the table. He didn’t unfold it yet, however, glancing to Remus instead. “But, um, no offense Harrigan, but I’m not really sure which problem Remus thinks you can help with. Or, uh… why.”

“Harrigan just finished a project for Flitwick,” said Remus. “That was, um… creating a very protected book, I guess? Right?”
Harry bit his lip. He supposed there wasn’t anything wrong with explaining, especially since Remus had already seen it, and he just wanted them to show him this ‘map’ and be done with it. “Chain protective enchantments,” he said. “Like we were doing in class before the holiday, only with the idea of spell chaining—you know, like in dueling?”

“Oh,” said James, and he actually looked interested. Figures he would be, with dueling involved.

“Anyways, one of the final spells was one that re-arranged ink on the page,” Remus said. “And he had to give a password to do it correctly.”

“Oh,” James said again, and his eyes widened slightly. “Do you have it with you? Can we see?”

“I left it with Professor Flitwick. And I don’t know if it will even work on your… map, unless you show me,” Harry warned. In truth, he had shaped the wording spell off of the obfuscus, and, well… If this was something where they would need explanation for that…

“Right,” said James, but he still hesitated. Sirius, however, was looking pointedly at the bookshelves behind Remus’s head, and Pettigrew was red in the face, trying to break out of the hex, no doubt.

It was a clever hex, Harry would give Sirius that. Especially for people who hadn’t got nonverbal casting down. Harry, whose luck with non-verbals was sporadic at best—it had been better since his bizarre duel with Quora, but he wasn’t about to give the Professor any credit—would have had trouble dealing with it. It must have been a recent addition to Sirius’s arsenal, if it hadn’t been used on Severus before—then again, Severus had been uncannily versed in non-verbal casting since Harry had known him…

But after a moment, James finally reached out and began to unfold the parchment. Harry watched with interest as it spread out to fill most of the table, far what he would have guessed from just looking at it.

“We still have a few issues to iron out,” James said, settling back. “And, well… it’s not exactly complete, but…”

Harry stared at the map before him. If you could call it a map—it was more like simplified blueprints drawn in black ink, rooms and hallways and staircases marked in. There were sections that were blank, leaving gaping holes, but beyond that it was a masterfully detailed representation of what was undoubtedly Hogwarts—there was the Great Hall, labeled in upright print, and the north courtyard—but more than that, it was magic. He watched as one of the staircases in the main hall began to change, swivelling to connect to the another landing, but another bit of movement caught his eye—

It was a black dot, drifting down one of the hallways. Alongside it floated a tiny label: Mr Filch.

“It’s brilliant,” Harry breathed.

When he looked up, he realized all four Gryffindors were staring at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” said James, cheeks coloring. “Just, for a moment, you looked like…”

He trailed off, and Remus cleared his throat. “So,” he said. “Do you think your spell will work on this?”

Harry blinked, determined that there was no point in worrying about whatever had distracted them, and glanced back down at the map. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know how it would react with the enchantments that are already there. And the way I did it with the book was through runes. I could show you how to do a… test version, but you wouldn’t want to try it on this first. And… did
you use runes in enchanting this?"

Lupin shook his head. “Arithmancy, mixed with normal enchantments—er, charms, I mean.”

“Oh,” said Harry. He frowned, and reached down to his wand. There were some things he could do with it—spells, to get a better idea—but his goal was really to slip off the null ward. By now he was practiced enough that he did not flinch as the magic came rushing around him, and he toyed with his wand as he adjusted, forcing himself to speak normally: “Well, I don’t have any experience with arithmancy, so you’ll have to research it yourself.” Another pause. “I wasn’t aware that arithmancy was even used to enchant things.”

“Normally, it’s not,” said Remus. “But I got the idea from—well, muggles have these devices called computers, and they are, um, made to work using numbers, in, uh…”

He floundered, searching for a way to explain, and Harry quickly interjected. “I was raised muggle,” he said. “You’re using ideas from programming to make magic act like a computer program.”

“Sort of,” said Remus, looking relieved. “I mean, that’s the starting point for it, but obviously computers aren’t this… and, I mean… well…”

“There’s only so much we could learn about programming from the muggle library this summer,” James finished, “So who knows, at this point, if it’s anything like that. And Remus is the only one who really understands the arithmancy part of it at all.”

“Huh,” said Harry, and he looked back down at the map, and, so that it wouldn’t be strange to them when he sat there and stared at it for a minute and came away with an understanding of the magic beyond what he should have been able, he lifted his wand and recited a spell he had only used once before— "Pracantario aparecium."

Remus let out a gasp, but Harry ignored him, and the web of light that appeared over and around the parchment, and focused on feeling the magic instead. It was complex—exceptionally so—and unfamiliar. The magic was forming in geometric shapes, twisting around each other, almost like gears in a clock. There were bits that were more stable—the rooms and parts of the building that, when Harry considered them, had always felt less magical, but some, like the moving staircase, were in constant motion, weaving together and apart, and all of it—

The breath caught in Harry’s throat as he realized it. All of it was tied to the castle itself. The magic in the stones. The magic that shifted the Room of Requirements—though a quick glance showed that the Room was not included on the map. But still—they had somehow managed to link a piece of parchment to the castle itself and, if Harry wasn’t wrong, if Hogwarts’ layout were to shift, so would the map… though that didn’t explain the blank areas, which meant…

“How are you linking the locations?” Harry asked.

“What is that?” James replied instead, his face illuminated by the spell and fascination.

“Magic. How are you linking the locations? I assume that’s a spell, not arithmancy?”

“Yeah,” said Remus, though he too was looking at the lights with interest. “Yeah, we have to go to each room and use a spell that finds the boundaries, and—”

Pettigrew let out another croak. Sirius and James ignored him, though Remus did reach over to pat his friend consolingly on the shoulder as he continued on:

“—and then there’s some older map-making spells that we’ve modified to this. Sirius found one
that’s used to map the tides, which has been especially useful for the staircases.”

“Huh,” said Harry.

“We have to actually be in the room to cast the spell, which is why it is taking so long,” James explained, and he finally turned away from the light, leaning towards Harry. “Speaking of which… What would it take for you to get us into Quora’s office?”

Harry blinked. “Hell no,” he said flatly.

“But you have to have access; you’re his assistant, right?”

“And I’m not going to…” Harry hesitated. Probably saying ‘get myself killed breaking in when I’m not supposed to be there’ would be too direct for the gaes. “…break his confidence like that. Besides, you’ve got the other Professors’ offices to deal with, haven’t you?”

“But Quora’s got his warded up tighter than a Gringotts vault,” James complained.

“Yeah, well. You think maybe that’s because people like you think it’s fine to just break in?” Harry asked. Then he blinked, realizing he was glaring at James and—what, was he actually defending Quora’s right to privacy? Jesus—no. He was just trying to keep these idiots alive. “Anyways, if it’s too hard to get in there, just wait until next year.”

“Quora’s not planning on coming back?”

It was Sirius who asked, to Harry’s surprise. “Er,” said Harry. “Not as far as I know. He’s just here to…” Well, to scout out potential Death Eaters, as far as Harry knew. “I mean, as a favor to someone on the board of Governors, I think. Besides, isn’t there some sort of curse on the position? That’s what I was told.”

“But he’s actually teaching us,” James whined. “To fight, I mean. To defend ourselves.”

It was Harry’s turn to look confused. “I thought you lot hated him.”

“Well, he’s obviously a blood purist, so of course we don’t like him. But at least he actually teaches us,” James said, though he frowned as he said so. “Hang on—you said you’re a muggleborn? But he likes you. And the Slytherins…”

“Muggle-raised, not that it matters either way,” Harry said, frowning at the knot of displeasure at being associated with him. “And he doesn’t like me; he thinks I’m useful, ’cause he doesn’t have to try and make sense of the firsties’ work—and can we please get back to the point?”

“Right,” Remus said quickly. He was beginning to look nervous as he glanced at Sirius, but Sirius was staring into space again. “Do you still have the test pages we did, James?”

“Sure,” said James, giving in surprisingly easily, though he was still frowning. Perhaps with only Remus talking, he was on better behavior. Either way, he reached into his bag, drawing out another piece of parchment. This one didn't have whatever expanding charms they'd put in place onto the first. n the actual map, and the diagram was much smaller, but much more complete. There were also a lot more of the dots like the one labeled ‘Filch’, though only about half of them had labels. It was only when he spotted someone stand up from one of the nearby tables at the exact same time as one of the dots moved that he realized—

“This is the library?”
“Yes,” Remus said.

“Huh,” said Harry. He knew, logically, that he had just pushed them to get back to the point again, but, well, he could barely imagine the amount of work that had gone into making this map, and he was bursting with questions. Including, as he found the cluster of dots representing their group and found only his unmarked: “Why are only some of the names labeled?”

James squinted down where Harry was looking, grabbing for his wand again. “Well, see, the spell we’re using now we have to do one by one, so, for example…” He tapped his wand on the edge of the page, and said with a somewhat careless tone: “Cognosco nomen Dudley Harrigan.”

Harry could feel the magic in the map shifting, and the ink seemed to ripple, but the dot remained unchanged. James frowned and tried again. “Cognosco nomen Harry Harrigan.”

Again, nothing changed. All four Gryffindors let out sighs. “And it’s unreliable, anyways. Half the time all we have to do is teach it a name and it will pair it with the dot it represents, but it is really… picky. Like Cat Sanchez, it didn’t work to use Cat; we had to use Catarina. But for Michael Thurston, we had to use Mike, but he doesn’t even go by Mike.”

“How’d you end up with it, then?” James asked.

“Muggle relatives,” Harry said shortly. “They’re, uh, kinda tasteless. Anyways, if—I’m guessing you’ve tied this map to Hogwarts’ magic? Which means there’s probably a student list somewhere, and whatever name is on there is the name that would work.”


“What?” said Harry.

“There’s a book, self-maintaining; when someone is identified as a candidate for Hogwarts, their name is added to the book, and when they are old enough the Professors just have to use a quick quill to write out all the letters and populate the addresses and names with the information from the book. It is a very automated process.”

“Why on earth do you know that, M—Remus,” James asked, though he asked it fondly. Remus turned pink.

“It’s in Hogwarts, a History,” he said. “I just mean, that’s probably where the names would come from, if you’re right.”

“Except Filch didn’t go to Hogwarts, did he,” James pointed out. “Being a squib and all.”

“But he’s probably signed a contract,” Harry said. “Everyone who works for the school does, and it is magically binding.”

James frowned, and opened his mouth again, working his way towards a question, but then Sirius spoke again. “Are you going to show the spell or not?” Sirius asked flatly, still not looking at Harry.

“Yeah, alright,” Harry said after a beat of silence. Yes, that would be better: show them the runes work and get out of here. He glanced around, and spotted a quill on the table—in front of Sirius. For a moment, he began to reach towards his own bag, but that was ridiculous. “May I borrow your
Another stretch of silence, and then Sirius reached forward and pushed it towards Harry. The thought crossed Harry’s mind that maybe it was cursed—the Gryffindors were known to play tricks on people, after all—but that was ridiculous. He’d taken the ward off to examine the map, and it was clearly just a regular quill, not even a self-refilling or spell-checking charm on it.

“Thanks,” he said, snatching the quill from the inkwell and tapping it against the glass to remove the excess liquid, and gestured to the map of just the library. “Do you need this for anything else? Can I mark on it?”

“Go ahead,” said Remus.

“Right.” He pulled it towards himself, examined the image for a moment longer, and flipped the sheet over, scrawling out a basic circle. “There’s a number of parts to this, so, uh, pay attention,” he said, beginning to mark out the cardinal runes. “These show the parts. First, to identify the form of the ink—I’m not sure whether it will uphold the enchantment or just remember the way the ink is when the spell activates; you might have to modify it. And then this to rearrange the ink…” He paused, glancing up. “Can someone pass me a book?”


“Any book,” Harry said. “Or—actually, some of your notes would be better. The way I set up the spell was to shift the ink to take a different form, right? So it needs something to change into.”

James tilted his head, but didn’t hesitate as he passed one of the sheets of parchment in front of Pettigrew his way. Transfiguration homework, apparently. Harry nodded his thanks and tucked the page underneath the library map, turning back to his work.

“So this section is going to pull the ink arrangement from that, and store that as another state, and then… this bit will take the password I set while casting as the trigger for moving back and forth between states. And this will… stop it shifting without that…”

He paused, glancing up for a moment, and was surprised to find all four Gryffindors watching him closely. He suddenly felt self-conscious of his work, of the way the quill had wobbled as he scratched *algiz*, detracting from the strength of the rune—not that any of them would know about that. In fact, they wouldn’t know enough about runes to critique his work at all, so he really shouldn’t feel self-conscious…

“I’m going to fill in the rest of the spell now,” he mumbled, pulling the map a bit closer to himself so he could lean over it and etch in the smaller runes. It wasn’t a *terribly* long spell circle; in fact it was shorter than the null ward, which he’d had to fit into a string of glass beads. But if he hadn’t spent every free moment of the last several days drafting and redrafting the exact runic construction, he wouldn’t have had the confidence that he did now that he knew the spell well enough to write it without consulting his notes. And it still took him several minutes to etch out the whole circle, ignoring the way Remus leaned over to Sirius and murmured something in his ear.

But when at last he was done, it was a simple enough spell to activate. He pushed the quill and ink back towards Sirius, double-checked that Peter’s transfiguration homework was still in place underneath it, and brought up his wand—but then paused. “I need something to use as the command to switch the states,” he said. “A word, or phrase.”

The Gryffindors glanced between each other. “How about ‘transfiguration’. Does that work?”
Harry shrugged, and lowered the tip of his wand to rest on the first rune. “\textit{Illuminus cantio. Evocoverbum Transfiguration.}” 

The Gryffindors gasped as the ink of the runes rippled as Harry’s magic coursed through them, but he ignored them, following instead his magic as it became its own entity. It was always an odd feeling, like suddenly becoming aware the sound of his own breathing—or, more accurately, being away of the sound of air leaving his lungs. But the spell activated quickly, and it did not require much magic, and as he’d used ink where the subject was ink, it was an optimal media to enchantment pairing.

Better, when he flipped over the map, the dots were still floating about as people crossed the room—\textit{REGULUS BLACK} and \textit{SEVERUS SNAPE} were paired together, and \textit{HECTOR SMITHE} seemed to be checking the aisles for something. That meant his enchantment hadn’t interfered with the ones they’d already cast on the ink.

“Well?” Sirius said. “Did it work?”

Harry bit back a retort and tapped his wand against the parchment again. “Transfiguration,” he intoned blandly.

Sure enough, the ink began to shift, and a moment later they were faced with a copy of Pettigrew’s homework. The writing was a bit thicker on the page, but it was still legible. And…

“What?” Sirius asked. “Did it work?”

Harry bit back a retort and tapped his wand against the parchment again. “Transfiguration,” he intoned blandly.

Sure enough, the ink began to shift, and a moment later they were faced with a copy of Pettigrew’s homework. The writing was a bit thicker on the page, but it was still legible. And…

“The idea, though,” Remus repeated. “It’s—”

But he stopped, grabbing the larger map and folding it over to hide it from view, and Harry was quick to realize why: Hector, who had been wandering through the shelves, had come up behind him and through the \textit{muffliato} Harry had cast. “Harry, \textit{there} you are,” he said in an exaggerated voice, grabbing Harry’s shoulder. There was a pause, and then he seemed to think better of even trying to
act—“What are you doing?”

“Lupin had some questions about the enchantments I did on the book,” Harry said, standing and grabbing his wand. “We’re done now, I think. _Finite._ ”

“Yeah, you’ve—yeah,” said Remus awkwardly. “Thanks for all your help.”

“Yeah, thanks, Harrigan,” James said quickly. “Sorry if we’ve kept you from anything.”

Sirius said nothing, returning to glaring at the wall again. Pettigrew looked like he’d like to say many things, but was still under the hex. And, despite himself, Harry felt compelled to add: “Feel free to ask if you have any more questions,” he said.

“Thanks,” Remus said again. “Really.”

Harry shrugged, and turned around. The intensity with which Hector looked over his face was startling—Harry knew him well enough by now to recognize the anxiety on his face. The blatant worry. Harry frowned, and quickly stepped forward, putting some distance between them and the Gryffindors’ table before asking lowly: “Is something wrong? Are you alright?”

“Am I alright?” Hector hissed back. “What were you thinking, Harry? Just following Lupin like that? He—I thought he—”

“What?” Harry said. “He really did just have some questions, Hector.”

“Questions at the same table as Pettigrew and Black? And you answered them?”

Frowning, Harry glanced around, and was startled to meet the eyes of Severus. He and Regulus were standing at the end of the aisle that led down to their regular table, both staring at Harry with concerned expressions. Well, Regulus’s was concerned, at least; Severus might very well be plotting Harry’s death.

“Yeah, I answered them? What do you expect, me just to ignore someone asking for help?”

“When it comes to _them_, yes!”

Madame Pince was glaring at them, and Harry had dispelled the _muffliato_ on the Gryffindors’ table, so he grabbed Hector by the elbow and pulled him out of the room before he could cause any real trouble.

“What’s really the problem?” he asked Hector when they were out in the hall.

“I told you!”

“Oh, come on,” Harry said. “You can’t have _that_ big of a grudge against them, Hector. You’re one of the most forgiving people I’ve ever met.”

He’d forgiven Harry for hanging out with the Slytherins, and going to the Halloween meeting, after all. It wasn’t something he wanted to test, but Harry suspected that the other boy would even forgive him taking the Dark Mark… eventually… but no, he did not even want to think about that.

“I’m not going to forgive all the shit Black has tried to pull on you, Harry!” Hector snapped. “I thought—when Lupin grabbed you, I thought he was the bait. And you just _went_ with him. And sat at a table with Sirius Black. Willingly. What the _fuck_ were you thinking?”

Harry blinked. “I’m… sorry I worried you,” he said slowly. “But really, Hector, it was just a
question…”

“But you didn’t know that!”

“We were in the library. Even Black isn’t stupid enough to try something in public, even if he
wanted to.”

“I saw the way he was glaring, Harry. He wanted to.”

Harry sighed. He couldn’t deny that Hector’s worry was… flattering. “I appreciate it, Hector, really,
but I can deal with Black on my own,” he said, hoping his voice was soothing. “Honestly, even if he
did try something drastic, I’m more than capable of handling him.”

“But you shouldn’t have to,” Hector said, and the way he said it, he sounded so helpless that Harry
was almost tempted to give him a hug. Almost.

“Well, it’s over with now,” he said. “And I only offered to answer more questions to be polite. I
doubt they’ll want any more help. They’re too proud for that.”

“Like some people I know,” Hector said. Harry shrugged—it wasn’t that he was too proud to ask for
help, it was either that he couldn’t or didn’t need to, but try telling Hector that. “Look, Harry…
just… if you’re going to talk to them, take someone with you. Me, or Pan, or, hell, even one of those
Slytherins. They were worried about you too, you know.”

“If I take a Slytherin with me to talk to the Gryffindors, it really is going to end in a fight,” Harry said
dryly.

“Then take me. Or Lily, even, or—you can’t just go putting yourself in danger like that!”

It was strange, really, Harry thought as he stared at Hector. To be honest, even if Sirius had gone
ballistic and attacked him, after all Harry had gone through with Quora over the last few weeks, a
hex-happy sixth year didn’t really feel like danger. There was nothing Sirius Black, an out of control
Gryffindor, could do to him that would stand near anything Quora had done, really. And if the silent
glaring had been anything to go by, Harry thought the shouting he had done maybe had actually
gotten through to Black. Or at least some part of it.

But Hector wasn’t living in a world facing Death Eaters and inexplicable violence on a weekly basis.
He was just another kid attending Hogwarts, for whom schoolyard bullies were the real enemy. And
while Harry respected Hector, well, he’d already proven that he didn’t mind lying to the other boy, if
it kept him young and sane and happy.

“Alright,” he said with an easy smile. “I’m not planning on talking to them again, anyways. Now…
have you taken a look at the runes reading, yet? The reversal circles are really fascinating, aren’t
they?”

•

“Stop fidgeting.”

Quora’s voice cut through the silence of the office like a bullet, for how it struck and silenced Harry.
Harry, who hadn’t even noticed his leg was bouncing until he was called out for it, resisted the urge
to scowl and instead bent further over the quizzes he was marking. If it hadn’t been first-year work, he would not have gotten anywhere in marking, but as it was the answers were so obviously right or wrong that even with his scattered focus the task was mind-numbingly simple.

He couldn’t even bring himself to be amused by the strange answers. Not when he was so painfully aware of the man at the front of the room, who had taken to demanding Harry keep the ward off when Harry was on the clock as his assistant. Not when the threat against Hogwarts had become so apparent that there were to be aurors in the castle. Not when Harry could not shake the fact that he had made himself complicit to the actions of a terrorist group, not when Quora was sitting right there and it seemed to his mind to be so easy to walk upstairs to Dumbledore’s office and turn the man in…

Not when he’d somehow gotten a full night’s sleep, even without stealing any potions, and had woken up feeling worse than before. Maybe he had the flu.

“Are you done with your work, Mr Harrigan?”

Harry flushed, realizing he was essentially staring at the professor—without actually looking at him, as it was his magic he was focusing on. “No, sir,” he said, forcing himself to try and read the answer one of the first years had scribbled down, clearly having scribbled down their answer at the last minute. He glanced up at the name—a Prewett. Not a muggleborn, then. After a moment, he gave up on deciphering the scrawl, marked it wrong, and turned to the next quiz—Lockhart’s. His handwriting may have been excessive in its flourishes, and his answers ranged from fanciful to outrageous, but at least it was legible.

Even trying to make sense of Lockhart’s answers, however, was not enough to keep Harry’s attention from drifting for long.

“If you are incapable of so simple a task, Mr Harrigan, I have another for you,” Quora said, and before Harry could pretend like he had been working, the man actually looked up, and beckoned Harry forward. “Come.”

Harry held back a sigh as he stood, pushing the sudden onslaught of self-critical thoughts firmly into the murk of occlumency as he closed the file and carried it to Quora’s desk. He needed to work on his occlumency; even sleep hadn’t been more than a band-aid to how many thoughts slipped through that ought to stay locked up tight where he couldn’t think them. Whatever this other task was, he doubted it would be good.

“I believe,” Quora said, and now he was the one quite openly staring, while Harry kept his gaze firmly over the man’s shoulder and tried in vain to pull his attention back. “That I am overdue for a chat with Mr Black and Mr Snape, don’t you?”

If it was Quora’s plan to get a rise from Harry, well: he had succeeded. Harry couldn’t prevent himself from recoiling, or from shaking when he realized he’d given Quora the satisfaction, and when he realized—

He needed to work on his occlumency.

“Don’t look so offended. I would expect you to be glad. After all, I can’t imagine that it is easy for a boy of your disposition to not have anyone to share the knowledge that the Defense Professor is actually your beloved lord with, is it?”

He was right, to an extent—how long had Harry been wishing he had someone to share that secret with? He couldn’t even tell Hani about Quora, after all. But that was a minor wish, in comparison to
the one where this was all a bad dream and the Dark Lord never came within spitting distance of the castle…

And *beloved* was most definitely out of the question.

““You said it, not me,” he settled on.

“Yes, well. Who am I to guess on the whims of teenagers? I will require your mark, Mr. Harrigan.”

“Why?”

Quora’s eyes narrowed. Shit.

“I mean—why use… my mark, sir? You don’t need it to call them.”

“Ah,” said Quora, gesturing for Harry to come around the desk. “Your arm, Harry.”

Pushing aside his reluctance—he’d already tested Quora’s patience, and he didn’t need a *crucio* to make this day any worse—he’d gone two weeks without one, and didn’t want to break that streak—Harry began to unbutton the cuff of his robe sleeve, stepping slowly around the desk and, after a moment’s hesitation, pushed the sleeve up, revealing the ugly tattoo to the man.

“In answer to your question,” Quora said, reaching out and snagging Harry’s wrist, tugging him another step closer, ignoring the way Harry let out a hiss at the shock of contact and sudden full awareness of his magic. “I think you understand the Mark better than most, no? It is, in essence, a web of my magic, tying each of you together, and to me. In the more, ah, traditional forms of this sort of bond, the Lord would be constantly connected to the, shall we say, vassals. You can see how that is a major security risk.”

“‘If one of… if one of us was caught, they could… trace it back to you.”

It was making it terribly difficult to focus on his words, Quora’s hand firmly gripping his wrist and his magic reaching out to wrap around Harry and the Mark, but the man seemed unbothered. It was hard to breath for an entirely different reason: the same fear that ran so deeply he couldn’t have yanked his arm free and run, even if he’d wanted to give in to the impulse.

“Yes. And there are any number of curses that can act across that sort of bond. Therefore I developed my own version. You recall that my magic now runs in your veins? Separated from the whole, but still mine, you would agree? Yes. I *could* still treat it as a regular bond if I had any wish, but for the most part, I remain separated from it, until it is of use.”

“Above and… outside of it, you mean.”

“Very good. You should be glad, Mr Harrigan: there is a side-effect to my modifications: in the rare instance of my demise, you will not go down with me.”

Harry shuddered. That there was even the possibility of his life being tied to the Dark Lord’s…

“Wouldn’t they be able to trace it from Death Eater to Death Eater, if they caught one?”

Quora smiled slightly. “No. But that is a piece of clever magic for another day, Mr Harrigan. As for why I am calling them this way at the present…” He trailed off and looked down again, pressing a long finger into the mark, so that it blackened and burned with magic. “That would be because it makes you uncomfortable.”

If you had asked Harry, he would have theorized that after over a month in such close contact with
the man, and with, as he had just pointed out, a shard of his magic implanted in Harry’s arm, his magic would have been less overwhelming. It wasn’t. When he finally let go, Harry’s arm was shaking and his vision was blurring and his ears were ringing as the blood pounded against them. The world seemed oddly tilted—and yet Quora turned back to his desk, picking up his quill, unbothered.

“I imagine they will be rather confused,” Quora said. “You do know where the Slytherin common room is, yes?”

Harry staggered backwards, away from him, and—“Yes,” he said, though he wasn’t sure how or why.

“Then run along and fetch them, Harry,” Quora said. “And unless you are still so angry with Mr. Snape that you would wish pain on him—though it does seem rather beyond your morals—I would fetch them quickly. I’m told that sort of call can grow excruciating if ignored. And I would hate for my patience with your ineptitude to run out.”

He looked up only long enough to reply to Harry’s glare with a cool smile. Harry, for his part, was eager to get away from the man before he did something stupid, though once he was safe on the other side of the door and wards he let out an angry hiss and, just for good measure, sent a blasting curse the direction of the desk at the front of the room, letting himself imagine, for a moment, that the man was there behind it, and caught up as the wood fragmented.

Then the fantasy played out a bit further, and Harry hastily treated the desk to an even more powerful reparo. He’d better hope Quora could not detect the traces of the spells, or the source of it, or at least some portion of the punishment he knew the man would be happy to provide would be enacted. He slipped his hand in his pocket and found the null ward, and twined it around his wrist, and as he did so, strengthened his occlumency, pushing everything away.

Everything. It wasn’t healthy, but neither was getting himself in trouble with a Dark wizard.

After that, Harry wasted no time making his way down to the dungeons, though he did have to wait a few minutes for someone to come out of the entrance—a perfectly ordinary stone wall. It was a group of third year boys who, rather than go back in themselves, just shouted back over their shoulders, *Oi! Snape and Black in there?*, which in turn earned them a sharp word from Michael Greengrass, their prefect, about decorum. But he did glance Harry’s way and give him a nod, beckoning him inside.

Harry couldn’t imagine why he would have seen the Slytherin common room before, but he would say it was ‘as he remembered it’, if only the obfuscus didn’t darken the memory: the ceilings were low, and it was rather dark, as the windows opened out to the lake and the chandeliers were rather dim, so the opposite of the airy and light Ravenclaw tower, but the furnishings were elegant, dark wood and leather and marble. Still, it looked comfortable, in its own way. “You can wait there,” Michael said, gesturing towards the cluster of sofas in front of the fire. “Evan, if you wouldn’t mind keeping Harrigan out of trouble for a minute?”

Rosier leaned his head back to look up at Harry over the armrest he was draped across. He took up two-thirds of a sofa all by himself, and his black-socked feet were resting in the lap of another sixth year, Joanne Savage, who seemed to be using them as a prop for her sketchbook. “Harrigan,” Rosier greeted with a smile, his face upside-down. “Welcome to our humble dungeons. You know, if you’re hoping to entertain Regulus, you really shouldn’t have Severus as your chaperone. He’s been even more insufferable than usual this week.”

“Shut up, Rosier,” Snape’s terse voice bit out. Harry turned to find him coming down a set of stairs,
which must have led to the dormitory. His face was tight, and a few steps behind him followed
Regulus, looking pale. “Potions revision?”

Harry raised an eyebrow, but nodded.

“Hey,” Rosier said, sitting up and twisting. “You said you wouldn’t help—why are you helping
them! No offense, Harrigan, Regulus.”

“Because he happens to be my lab partner, and I would rather not have our cauldron blow up, thank
you very much. And because Lord Black pays,” Severus said coolly. “And because you only ask
because you do not want to do the work, whereas Harry is… well. He tries.”

Harry scowled. He should have taken longer on the stairs—Snape could have left it at ‘lab partner’.
“We’ll head up to Ravenclaw territory, then, if you’re so opposed to anyone extra leeching on.
Merlin knows you would hate to give advice unaccompanied by insults.” He paused, and, figuring
he might as well go all-in, added—“Do you need your things?”

“Your book should suffice,” Severus said, stepping forward. Regulus just nodded.

“Right,” said Harry, turning again. He glanced down at Rosier. “Er, see you.”

“See you,” Rosier echoed.

Harry wasn’t sure whether the tone was mocking or not. He decided it didn’t really matter, gave a
nod of thanks to Michael, and turned to lead the way. He strode quickly, not wanting to walk
alongside and chat with the two Slytherins—not when their marks were no doubt still burning—and
when they were on the other side of the wall, said stiffly: “We’ll use Professor Quora’s office. He’s
given me permission.”

There was a sharp intake of breath behind him, but Harry did not know which one, and none of them
said anything for a minute.

But once they were above the dungeons, following the halls of classrooms that went mostly unused
by students on the weekends, Regulus spoke. “Harry?”

Harry stiffened, trying not look too obviously to the portraits they were walking past. “We’ll be there
in a minute,” he said shortly. “And then we can talk… potions questions. Please do not try to get me
into it before I have to.”

“It’s not that,” Regulus said. “It’s just—only, yesterday? In the library?”

Ah. The pair had been very obviously gawking at him, and since Hector had swept him away so
quickly, not gotten any answers. However… “Is that really important right now?” he asked, turning
to up the last set of stairs.

“You were accosted by Lupin,” Severus said coldly, spitting out the name like a curse. “And sat at a
table with Potter and Black.”

“And Pettigrew,” Harry said. Pettigrew had been the only one of them outright hostile towards
Harry, not that Harry felt he really had anything to fear from that Gryffindor.

“Did Sirius—did they do anything to you?” Regulus asked, his voice strained.

A drop of guilt rippled through Harry, as usually did when he was dealing with matters of the Black
brothers’ fractured relationship. But it passed quickly, this time, and he shook his head. “They just
had some questions about the book project,” he said. “Which I answered, but, well. None of them have any understanding of how runic enchantments work.”

He could feel Severus glaring at his back. Harry understood that, really; half the work on the book had been his, so sharing that with the Gryffindors, of all people, was rather rude. But Harry had only touched on a bit that he’d worked out, so he didn’t feel any guilt. And as he had told Hector, he wasn’t about to deny someone help over a petty grudge. And the map had been interesting…

“But why?” Regulus asked. “Harry, they’ve been nothing but horrid to you.”

“So I should be horrid in return, is that it?”

“They deserve it!”

Harry shook his head. It sounded so childish, and here they were on their way up to Quora’s office, and God only knew what the man wanted from them. “It’s between me and them,” he said firmly. “And they didn’t try anything, and even if they could, I told you, Reg: I can deal with Sirius Black.”

If they wanted to press him any more, it didn’t matter, as they were already at the classroom, and Harry led the way inside. When they got to the office, Harry opened the door for them, letting the pair inside. He saw Regulus’s eyes widen as he passed through Quora’s wards—Harry knew that with their marks burning they would feel the pull to the man, but the wards would obscure and disperse it. But Regulus’s steps did not falter, and Harry didn’t look at Severus as he went past, just waited to shut the door.

“Don’t bother, Mr Harrigan,” Quora said, still writing. “I do need your earlier task completed. You may do so in the classroom.” His quill finally reached the end of the line, and he moved it to rest in the inkwell before looking up, picking up his wand and banishing the papers from his desk, and with another flick of his wand, he summoned two chairs that settled directly in front of his desk. “Mr Black, Mr Snape, take a seat, if you would. There is much to discuss.”

Harry glared at the man for a moment, but then he came forward and snatched up the folder of homework he’d left on the man’s desk earlier, and grabbed his bag and the quill and red ink from the side table, before turning and storming from the office. The door clicked shut behind him—Quora’s spellwork, no doubt—and for a moment, Harry stood at the top of the stairs, shaking.

It was sick, it was wrong—he had led them to their doom, and they had come willingly along— But what should he do about it? Charge back in, and, what, attack Quora? On top of everything else, Severus and Regulus would jump to Quora’s aid, and then what? Or Harry would be an example—and then everything else would go, because Quora had already told him the imperius was the least of the controlling magic at his command— No, the very thought was ridiculous.

And he had no way of knowing that the Dark Mark wouldn’t kill him if he tried.

So what, then? Run to Dumbledore, or the aurors working on the wards, and make small talk about absolutely nothing because the gaeu Quora had already gotten on Harry wouldn’t let Harry do anything close to revealing the ‘professor’s’ secrets?

No, there was nothing. Nothing big enough to mean anything. He could disobey, leaving the room without permission, without marking the rest of the papers. Of course, that would just be asking for punishment, wouldn’t it? And the inevitable Cruciatuus would hurt, but not as much as whatever Quora thought up to get his true revenge. And now that he had Regulus and Severus firmly in his grip…
Slowly he turned and came down the steps from the office. He hesitated for a moment at the bottom, but quickly decided at sitting at the first table in the student seating, rather than at the front. He didn’t fancy sitting in Quora’s seat.

He contemplated intentionally mismarking the second-year papers, because surely Quora wouldn’t take the time to read over them, not when he had so little time to spare… But then again, he had no way of knowing Quora wasn’t using the time turner during the night, to give himself a chance to do whatever it was someone like him would fill his night hours with and still have the time for marking.

Besides, Lockhart’s paper was still at the top. Holding him to the strictest standards would be more satisfying, and less dangerous. So he set about marking, and allowed for no leniency, and if there was a creeping thought that Quora would be more satisfied by that than his usual marking, he squashed in a flood of red ink.

It only served to make his mood worse, however, channelling irritation like that, so the moment the door at the top of the stairs opened Harry jumped up off his seat, grabbing for his wand—but it was just Severus, of course. He frowned down at Harry, and shut the door behind him, and Harry quickly sat back down, grabbing the quill again. He didn’t want to know what he had talked to Quora about—or why Regulus was still in there—and he thrilled that the null ward helped him ignore any magic that might have been used against Severus—

But Severus took the seat in front of Harry, and waited. After a moment, Harry looked up, raising an eyebrow in question—

And he couldn’t hold back a breath of relief as he saw that Severus was no more pale or twitchy than he usually was. “You need something?”

“You didn’t tell me the Dark Lord was in residence at Hogwarts,” Severus said matter-of-factly.

“You didn’t tell me you’ve been working with him for over a month.”

He seemed to miss the sharp breath of air Harry inhaled, hearing those words come from someone else’s mouth— the Dark Lord at Hogwarts. Quora had predicted it would be a relief, and Harry had believed it, but in truth someone else knowing did nothing but squeeze at Harry’s heart, like one of those machines muggles had in shopping centers with the claws that grabbed at toys but always missed had this time struck its mark and was pulling the strength right out of him.

“As if I could have,” he managed to say.

“He ordered you not to.”

“Essentially.”

No need for Severus to know any more about the contract. He tightened his grip on the quill and looked back down at the page, the last in his stack, trying to determine whether or not the words Rosie Jones, Gryffindor, had chosen were even arranged in the proper order, for how little sense they made, but Severus was still sitting there, watching, and Harry couldn’t focus enough to deal with deciphering any of this, so he marked the question wrong and shut the folder.

“I don’t understand you, Harrigan,” Severus said coolly. “You act all morally superior, but you became a Death Eater on your own. Before either of us did.”

The quill, Harry tapped against the rim of the ink vial, a year and a half with hardly two knuts to rub together having ingrained consciousness over the cost of every wasted drop. It wasn’t that he hadn’t heard the accusation in Severus’s voice, it was that he didn’t think he owed a response.
Still, Quora had told him to finish the task, and until Harry could return the folder to the office he was stuck here. They might as well have this conversation now. It might even save them the effort of carrying on their disagreement for another week—if only Severus would realize the gravity of the situation.

“I had people to protect.”

“So do all of us! You think people would be coming together like this for anything less? We have to fight, because if we don’t fight now, the same old shit is just going to keep happening, over and over —”

“You think Mulciber cares about that?” Harry snapped. “Or Bellatrix Lestrange?”

He knew her name now. Overheard, as someone laughed out gossip about a chastity event, perfectly ordinary and high society, where she had done something completely within the normal realm of outrageous—

“People like them are means to an end.”

Means to an end. Harry wondered if Snape thought that about him, too, and Regulus, and everyone else he showed a shred of decency to.

“I watched Bella torture a squib to death, because her mother sits on the Wizengamot and voted against his interests, and killing the family squib was seen as a minor warning step,” Harry said flatly.

Severus eyed the door of the classroom—oh, so now he remembered where they were—but Harry wasn’t done.

“Do you want to know what it feels like, magically, when someone dies? Do you? I dare you to try and live with that knowledge. Look into my eyes, cast the spell. Legilimize me. I won’t stop you. I don’t think I could even be obliviated of it, by how many times he made me relive the memory—come on, don’t you want to see what he wanted to?”

Marlene McKinnon still wasn’t back in the castle. There were some whispers that she wouldn’t be coming back at all, but the Quidditch schedule switched to accommodate her absence, which meant the staff expected her return. Which meant Harry would have to face her. He wasn’t sure how he would, when he woke more nights than not scrambling to make sure he wasn’t lost in the void, that he couldn’t feel her severance—

“It was your choice to be there,” Severus repeated, unmoved. “The Dark Mark will kill anyone not willing to take it, to serve—”

He cut off at Harry’s hollow laugh. “You believe that, don’t you. You believe that I had a choice.”

“There is always choice.”

“Sure, tell yourself that. Well, then, my choice was months of continued torture, concluded inevitably with Dark Magic beyond the imperius to take away my will, or, if I managed to fight that, too, death, just another war casualty for history to swallow up. I could die a painful death to make a point, or live, and do what I could with the space I’d been given.” Harry shook his head, clenching his fist tight. “Maybe I was naive to think I could really make a difference, but if my witnessing the deaths of innocents can save anyone, then maybe that’s enough. I don’t know. I had to do something, Severus, and every door to what might have been the good or right choices were closed to me the moment he set foot in the school.”
“That’s what we are all doing! You’re not the only one who refuses to stand aside while there are problems that need to be fixed—”

“You know why he was making a point that you came to him, Severus?” Harry demanded. “It’s because unlike me, you did have a choice beyond ‘comply or die’. I’ve tried to make space for my own will in this—you know the deal I made with him?” Harry laughed, half-hysterically, because there was nothing stopping him now that Severus was in on the secret, now that he had the mark. “I tried to save you, you bloody idiot. You and Regulus and every other idiotic kid who would go and put their lives in his hands. I tried to buy you time, to give you a chance—”

Severus was gaping at him, but cut in with a snarl—“You had no right—”

—because how many times have you been held under the cruciatus? Or tortured because you hesitated, or tried to keep a secret you were given in confidence? How many times, Severus?”

Severus did not reply, his mouth still half open.

“You think it hurt to receive the mark? To be called? The mark is just a shard, no, a splinter of his magic, a piece so small he would never notice it gone. What do you think it will be like when he’s in a bad mood? When you’re in the wrong place with the wrong words and he’s angry—do you want to be there? Do you want Regulus to be?”

Severus swallowed, but he didn’t look any less angry. “You act like he’s a child, but Regulus is stronger than you think. I’m stronger than you think, if you would—”

“Even if you think you can deal with it, you don’t know. You don’t know, Severus, and you could have gone another year without knowing. You could have avoided this all. Instead, you had to go charging in.”

Severus was silent for a minute. “You made a deal with the Dark Lord.”

“For all the good it did.”

“What was it?”

Harry laughed again. “A contract. Another bloody contract to try and live with.” He shook his head, and started pacing again. “He can’t recruit anyone of Hogwarts age, or order anyone to recruit, or make use of kids like they were Death Eaters if they are not. He agreed, and easily, because kids with the trace aren’t useful to him anyways. He marked the two of you to—to fuck with me, I guess, ‘cause you’re a liability. Right under Dumbledore’s nose. God, Severus, have you realized that you have a bloody tattoo on your arm? Dumbledore is not an idiot.”

But Severus ignored him. “He didn’t want us.”

“Not yet.”

“But he wanted you.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What do you think? You should know; it interested you just the same.”

“Your… magic sensing.”
“Magemetry. Yes. And the OMRL; that’s what he gets out of me.”

“That’s it?”

“It? If there’s anything else, finding out would involve psychoanalyzing a madman, and I really
don’t want to go there.”

Severus gave him a look. “I don’t understand you at all,” he repeated.

“Well, I don’t understand you either, so—have you forgotten you’re a halfblood?” Harry hissed. “Or
Lily—and don’t try your act with me—you still turn into a deer in headlights every time you see her.
She’s a muggleborns, don’t you remember that? Don’t you know what it means?” Severus had folded
his arms over his chest when Harry mentioned Lily, and it took all Harry’s power to not punch the
mulish look off his face. He had an awfully punchable face, these days…

His took a long breath in instead. “You haven’t… you’ve read the papers, the last few weeks, as
people keep vanishing—you think it’s just a banishing charm that gets rid of them? You think they
go without a fight—you think it’d be any less vio? Hell—He sent you and Regulus back to
Hogwarts with me, but the village that burned down? I’d bet my right hand it was a test, of sorts,
gauging how the new recruits could handle the Dark Arts.”

“I would have succeeded,” Severus insisted.

“Don’t you see that that’s not a good thing?” Harry looked back down at his hands, and found them
shaking; he dug his fingers into his robes and squeezed, not caring that he was pinching into his leg
with the cloth. “Can’t you see? For God’s sake; I’ve been trying to keep you—”

The door above them opened before he could finish, and Harry leapt to his feet in surprise. It was
just Regulus, who raised an eyebrow before shutting the door behind him.

"To keep me what?” Severus asked lowly, but Harry shook his head.

"Never mind.” He eyed Regulus up and down, searching for any sign he'd been harmed—but of
course he wouldn't have been; not this early on. Not when, as Voldemort had put it, they were still
under Dumbledore's thumb, and unless something had changed in their conversations with Quora,
they weren't under contract to keep Quora's secrets the way Harry was. Harry imagined that
Regulus's parents, at least, would take issue if he were, but beyond that—well, as Quora always said,
a willing servant was better.

And wasn't that just the worst of this all? He would have liked to consider Regulus and Severus
friends—well, Regulus, at least; with Severus as a distant someday—but now they'd gone and
willfully joined the man running a revolution on a platform inspiring violence. And Harry had
known they would—he'd left himself the list of Death Eaters, after all. How could he overlook
something like that?

"He said you could go, and asked me to encourage you to get some sleep,” said Regulus as he came
down the stairs. He paused at the bottom, a puzzled look on his face. "Are you alright, Harry?"

"Am I—"

But Harry cut off. Regulus was fine; unlike Harry, he wouldn't give Quora a reason to hurt him.
Regulus wanted to please him, no doubt, and without ulterior motives. It hurt to think about. To even
look at him. He could have done so much more with his life than become a Death Eater, but he had
chosen this.
"I'm fine," he said shortly, and turned away, pushing up his glasses to rub his eyes and grabbing his bag with his other hand. He had known, and yet—he needed to get out of here. He wasn't sure why Quora had told him to stay in the classroom, if he was just going to send him away later. More power plays, probably. "I'll see you guys later," he muttered, and moved to go.

He didn’t get far: a hand shot out to grab his own. "Wait."

Pulling his hand away, he shot Severus a curious glance, but Severus's face betrayed nothing. "Are you going to the library?" Severus asked.

The library? "Maybe later," he said. "I'm getting dinner, now, if you would let me."

And still, Severus's face remained unmoving. "May I join you ‘maybe later’, then?"

Harry squinted at him. "I'm not going to stop you from going to the library?"

A flicker of something passed through Severus's eyes—was that relief?—and he dipped his head. "I'll see you then," he agreed.

Harry frowned, which was probably why he unthinkingly glanced at Regulus again. He turned quickly away, but not before he saw the bewildered hurt on Regulus's face. Why? What had Harry done—had he been too obvious in his anger? But he shook his head as he hurried out of the classroom.

Whatever he had done, there was no way for Harry to resolve it now. Not when it hurt so bad to even look at Reg, knowing that for all Harry had given it hadn't been enough—

He sucked in a determined breath of air and hurried down to the kitchens, timing the following breaths to his footsteps and trying to draw on the meditative state that was the basis for strengthening occlumency.

He had to focus on what was really important now. Keeping his secrets safe and himself alive long enough to find his way back to the future. He had the journal in his bag, and was nearly done with his translation, and maybe it would have the answers. To getting away from this mess. To leaving the past to play itself out, without getting any more involved than he already was.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all! Thanks for reading, as ever, and commenting. I hope this chapter, behemoth that it is, will keep you tied over for the next few weeks, because: Happy New Year!

...that's code for I'm not going to be posting again until, on the best-case-scenario side, mid-January. Holidays, family visiting, and the last four chapters need a lot more work than the current ones had.

In any case, I just want to add: thank you for sticking with this story through the last year! It's been a wild ride for both my posting schedule and the rest of my life, and I'm always so blown away by those of you have come along for this long of a ride with me. We're getting closer to the end of Part I, now, and I almost can't believe how long it has been. (and then I try to re-read the beginning chapters, and it's almost like I'm reading someone else's writing. Which is... interesting, to say the least.)

See you next year!
Notice Chapter/Beta Request (TBD)

Chapter Summary

Apologies for cluttering any inboxes. This is not a new chapter.

**Update:** I'm happy to say that I've got a group of very different backgrounds who have stepped forward to take this on with me! I'll leave this up for now so you know where things are at; hopefully we'll be looking at updated chapters up mid-May and the final stretch of the story following that!

Hi! Your very sleepy and fretful author here. First of all: I apologize for cluttering any inboxes; I've gone back and forth about posting this way, but I really could not think of a better way to communicate with people who might be viable for beta reading the portion of this fic that I have in mind (which is to say, people who have read it already and are invested enough to see updates on it).

If you're not interested in beta-ing: great! Thank you for reading and supporting the story thus far. Unless you want a peek behind the curtain and a look at the sort of plan I am aspiring towards, there's no need to read below.

Otherwise, yes: I'm in search of betas. Ideally, three or four. And while I'm hopeful this works and I receive some response and am able to proceed as I've laid out a plan to, while I have been a beta before, I haven't had a fanfiction beta in several years, and usually, it was someone who was mostly doing surface-level checks and being a sounding board as I wrote. This time I'm looking for something a bit more involved. This time I am asking the unknown that is the universe, and the generosity of strangers, and have spent the last few weeks going back and forth between options: to slow down and edit more, to get it done as fast as possible and then go back and maybe do the humongous task of deep revision for the whole thing... or just... moving on to part 2....... without resolving anything................... And after all that waffling, and writing myself in circles I've settled on a what I wrote below.

And, of course, if this doesn't work, I'll still be finishing this fic. It will just... continue to have some of the issues I'd rather it not, like... chapter 33, as it stands now, being 29k, which would be easily resolvable by the trimming and re-cutting I've desperately needed to do for some time.

Anyhow.

Please feel free to ask questions in the comments or by the email mentioned below. And: thank you again for taking the time to consider this.

(Yikes, is it stressful to post, though!)
Beta Brief

I’ll try to keep this brief, but I think we all know that’s not my strong point. Nor is asking things of people, and I do feel that I’m asking a lot, so if you look at this and say ‘Wow, Noa: you jump right into it with the demands’ but still want to participate in some way (i.e. only being available for the first or last pass, etc., needing the schedule pushed back), please feel free to let me know. As I am a full-time worker with more time on weekends, I’ve set each Deadline to be Sunday—you could definitely do things earlier. Heck, you could do the first pass for 29-32 all in one day, if you’d really like.

I’ve divided this into three parts. The first is what is relevant for now.

Part I: Trial

What I’m looking for: A trial beta/group of betas to edit through chapters 29-33.

Main Goals (descending): Surface level editing: trimming, grammar/readability, internal consistency (style). Continuity; extremely pressing content issues. Recuts.

Necessary Commitment:

- I estimate a very minimum of one hour per week, more likely two or more depending on each beta’s style, for 11-12 weeks. (C29’-32’ will be available to work on from the beginning, so betas definitely could do the first pass as early as they prefer.)
- Access to email and Google Docs (I do all writing and editing in GD, and would ask betas to use suggestion mode/make copious use of comments).
- Allowing said email to be cc’d with other betas/not being bothered by potential interaction with other betas/being generally polite and respectful of other betas input.

Intended timeline for the initial trial (based on currently completed writing):

- Beta Pass 1: one chapter per week.
- Dependent on the level of re-writing necessary, Noa puts up edited chapters every other week.
- Beta Pass 2: one chapter every other week, following Noa’s Pass.
- Depending on the level of edits necessary, may need to rinse and repeat.
- Finalize recuts by Week 11.
- Recuts go up Week 12/C33 week 13.

**Tentative Deadlines** (Based on C29 Pass 1 Due Sunday, 2/17; it’s really the weeks that are solid here)

Chapter Beta Pass 1 Noa Pass 1 Beta Pass 2 Post

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<td>W11 4/28</td>
<td>W13 5/12</td>
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★★★★★★

If having read this you are willing to give it a go, great! Please send me an email at anon.noa@gmail.com, and include any questions, concerns, thoughts about feasibility, uh… stipulations? As well as:

1. How you would like me to refer to you (name + pronouns),
2. what time zone you are in,
3. if you would need this whole schedule pushed back or otherwise adjusted (such that the C29 Beta Pass 1 deadline should be 2/24; 'I'll be busy starting in April but can help until then', etc.),
4. if you have any strengths/weaknesses as a beta (i.e. good at content, continuity whiz, not great at copy, and so forth), and
5. anything else you think I should know!

Once again: thank you! There's a chance it may take me a few days to respond to any emails, but know I'm really excited to hear from you and hope that this works out.

★★★★★★
Congrats! You’ve read everything relevant for now. The rest of this is an organization on my part, and what I’m hoping that finding a beta/betas will lead to. No, no one needs to reads this. No, if you participate in the trial, I am not going to demand (though I will probably hope, ask, and maybe beg) that you continue on further if you do not want to.

**Part II: The Tentative Path**

If the trial goes well (as in: we work well as a team, continue to have the time and will to devote that time to this story, I find I can handle the additional level of commitment well, and no major life upsets happen on my end), then following the trial period would be Part II, aka finishing (!) this story.

**Main Goals** (descending): Content, continuity. Flow, aiming to end ToTT in a (somewhat) satisfying manner. Surface levels: trimming, grammar/readability, internal consistency (style).

**Necessary Commitment:** Same variable amount of time per week through May 2019; potentially being ‘spoiled’ for parts of the story rather than just reading and enjoying (unless solely committing to copy).

**Theoretical Timeline** (based on continued writing/pacing, and highly idealized productivity on Noa’s end):

- Noa completes writing on C34-36 by W3/W5/W7. (this is a very optimistic goal, especially considering I'll be editing, but, like, a writer can dream. More likely could be W3/W6/W9, which would still work)

- Dependent on completion, Beta Pass 1 in W6/8/10

- Noa makes editing/re-writing pass in W12/13/14.
- Beta Pass 2.

- Dependent on the need for re-writes, a third pass, and re-arrangement of chapters, post C33* by W13, C34* by W14, C35* W15, C36* W16. (*Dates dependent, of course, on not having to re-cut into 37+ chapters)

- Part I is completely posted!

**Very, Very Tentative Dates:**

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<td>W12 5/5</td>
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**Part III: The Ideal Unknown**

*Ideally,* following completing the writing on Chapter 36, I will go through and revise the outline of the second part of the story, The Secrets We Keep, such that by the time ToTT finishes posting, I will be prepared to start writing. However, as it stands now, I don’t intend to begin seriously pursuing writing TSWK until next autumn, at the earliest.

In the interim, *ideally,* I would have betas going through the earlier chapters of ToTT, giving it the same loving, slicing-and-dicing-and-trimming-away-the-fat editing treatment. As there are parts of the story that I have *desperately* wanted to rewrite, but not yet found the time for, I predict this could take a good chunk of time in and of itself. The first pass, therefore, for any beta who might be willing
to stick around for that long, would be an overall content and continuity check, not restricted by chapter. Following any serious re-writing, it would then need to put through the same treatment of beta-ing and recutting.

(Ideally, I would write the story perfectly the first time, but, well, wouldn't we all).

**Goals** (descending): Serious content revision, focusing on smoothing character development, establishing sub-plots, and early world-building/premise-setting/style setting/foreshadowing. Trimming, flow, and continuity; recuts. Surface levels: grammar/readability, internal consistency (style).

**Necessary Commitments:** Some level of time commitment, for an indeterminate amount of time. A good deal of patience with an author who betas will have to drag unnecessary words from as the author clings to them kicking and screaming.

**Potential further development?:** Review of the outline for the other two parts of the story, including discussion of re-division, there, as ToTT gets (hopefully) sliced apart. In a distant future: revision on TSWK, and TWIDP.

If you've made it this far: wow! Uh, thanks. Hopefully we'll be hearing more from each other soon.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!